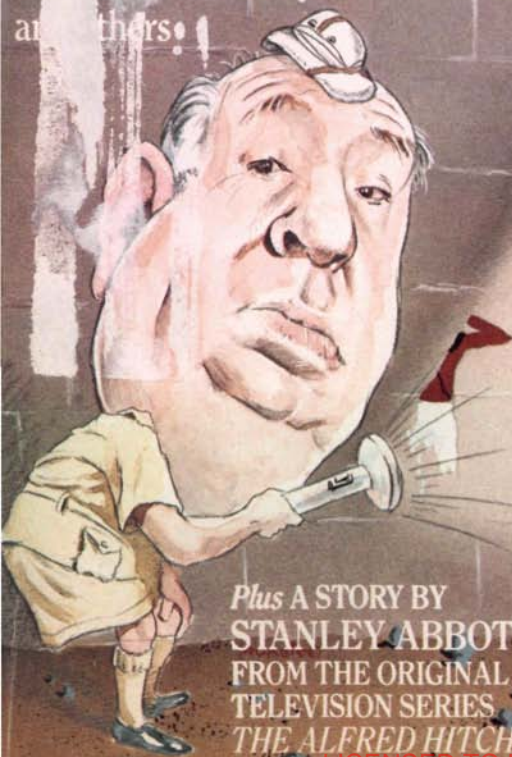


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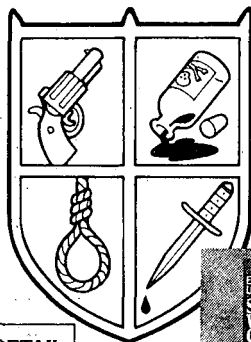
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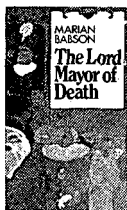
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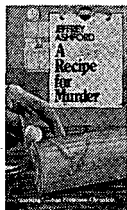
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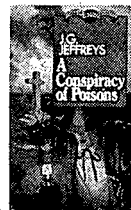
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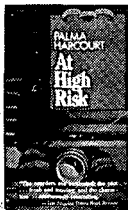
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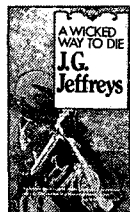
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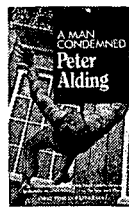
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 30, No. 13, Mid-December, 1985. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at \$1.95 per-copy in the U.S.A. \$2.25 in Canada. Annual subscription \$19.50 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$23.00 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1932, Marion, O. 43305. Call (614)383-3141 with questions regarding your subscription. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. ©1985 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Form 3579 to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 1932, Marion, Ohio 43305. In Canada return to 628 Monmouth Rd., Windsor, Ontario, N8Y3L1. ISSN: 0002-5224.

EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

In this issue . . . G. S. Hargrave is back with a new Sheriff Bigelow story, "Sheriff Bigelow and the Nickel-Plated Pocket Watch." Some of you may remember the first tale about the denizens of Constantine County, "Sheriff Bigelow and the Bare Cold Facts," published in AHMM in July 1984. In that story, the estimable sheriff and Deputy Walts found themselves faced with a body in a bathtub; this time around, they get involved in a most mysterious case of graveyard vandalism.

Back with us as well are Al and Mary Kuhfeld, with their police partners, Nygaard and Hefner, in "Scales of Justice." (See "An Ill Wind," April 1984, and "Allergic to Death," September 1984.) Nygaard takes center stage in this story of an

injustice unexpectedly—and entertainingly—redressed.

And then there's Stanley Abbott's story, "The Chinless Wonder," the second in our series from the original Alfred Hitchcock TV shows—in which a man discovers that a new (but fake) beard may be a lot more trouble than it's worth.

There's much more, of course, but *not* much more space. In closing, however, we wanted to note that the film column, "Murder by Direction," is written this time by Jennifer Shaw, daughter of our regular film reviewer, Peter Shaw, whose doctors thought an operation took precedence over movie-going. (Odd idea, but they did.) Peter is fine and will be back soon; in the meantime, we are very glad to have Ms. Shaw fill in for him.

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FICTION

Murder in the Fast Lane

by James A. Noble



Illustration by George Thompson

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"Mommy, how fast are we going now?" asked little Joel again, leaning across his older sister to get a glimpse of the speedometer.

"Will you quit bothering Mom?" Sissy scolded, pushing him back. "You can't read the numbers anyway."

Alice glanced over at her two children in the front seat and smiled. "Don't be too critical of Joel, honey. Remember, someday when he's your age, he may be a better reader than you."

"That's right," agreed Joel, making a production of folding his arms across his chest and giving his sister a "smarter than you" look.

"Why all this sudden interest in how fast I'm driving, Joel?" asked Alice.

Joel turned away and looked at the tips of his shoes sticking out over the edge of his seat.

"Answer me, honey."

"I can't tell you," replied the boy, defensively.

"Why not?"

Joel hesitated a moment and then said, "'Cause Charlie told me not to."

Charlie again, thought Alice bitterly. The court had ordered him to stay away from the kids, and here he was sneaking behind her back and telling her children heaven knows what . . . her children.

She didn't want them anywhere near Charlie. It was after five years of marriage that she discovered what a cruel, sadistic man he was. Even so, the marriage might have held together had it not been for her discovery that her husband was a gangland enforcer, inflicting pain and punishment on command from mobster bosses.

Alice no longer thought of him as her husband. Even the children called him "Charlie" instead of "Dad" or "Father."

"When did you talk to Charlie, Joel?" The tone of her voice frightened the boy a little.

"Yesterday . . . outside the house."

"What did he say to you?"

"He told me to give you something when you drove us to Mr. Happyland today." Mr. Happyland was Joel's name for the day care center.

"Well, why don't you give it to me now?" asked Alice, giving her son a reassuring smile.

"Not until you're going sixty," said Joel.

"Sixty? . . . You mean sixty miles an hour?"

Joel nodded.

Alice glanced at the speedometer. "We're going sixty-two miles an hour."

Joel reached under his seat belt harness and removed a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. He held it out and

Sissy opened it and passed it to her mother.

Alice began to read in glances while she drove.

Dearest Darling:

Don't let your speed fall below fifty. I've put a bomb in your car . . .

Alice screamed and dropped the note. The car swerved off onto the gravel of the narrow shoulder, and she struggled to regain control and steer it back onto the highway. It fishtailed briefly, scattering gravel, then finally settled back onto the hard surface. She glanced at the speedometer. Fifty-three. She pressed the gas pedal to the floor and the speed climbed quickly. She held it at sixty-five.

"Sissy!" Her voice cracked. "Pick up the note and read it to me."

"What's the matter, Mom?" A confused, frightened expression was on the little girl's face.

"Just do it," ordered Alice in a trembling voice. Up ahead, a left-turn signal light of a semi blinked on.

Sissy retrieved the paper and began to read aloud.

"Dearest Darling. Don't let your speed fall below fifty. I've put a bomb in your car and attached it to the speedometer cable coming out of the . . ."

Sissy held up the paper and pointed at a word.

"Transmission," said Alice, sharply.

"... transmission. Sixty miles an hour will arm the bomb, less than fifty miles an hour will det . . . o . . ."

"Detonate," said Alice, trying not to let her fear creep into her voice. A few hundred yards ahead, the semi pulled into the passing lane, suddenly revealing an equally large moving van in the other lane. Both were moving slowly. Alice let the speed drop to fifty-two. Because of the narrow shoulders and ditches on either side of the two lanes, there wasn't enough room for Alice to get the little hatchback by.

"Come on," she pleaded to the semi, "get around him, please. Hurry."

Sissy continued reading.

"... detonate the bomb. You shouldn't have left me. My life is ruined and you're to blame. I hope you live just long enough to think about what you've done to me.

"Hope you remembered to fill the tank. Have a pleasant drive. Charlie."

Alice breathed a little gasp as she glanced at the gas gauge. Less than an eighth of a tank was left. At the moment, that was the least of her worries. The two big trucks were side by

side, creeping along up a small hill, and she had almost caught up with them. Desperately, she leaned on the horn and began to flash the headlights.

She realized she was faced with a horrible decision. Outside the car, the road surface raced by. The mere thought of forcing Joel and Sissy to jump from the moving car made her tremble.

She considered the possibility that the letter was just a cruel hoax, perpetrated by the twisted mind of a man she once called her husband. If she slowed down . . . She shook her head. She knew Charlie. If he said he had attached such a bomb to the car, he did it. The bomb and the nightmare were both quite real.

The two huge trucks were now directly in front of the hatchback. Alice made her decision.

The biggest opening seemed to be between the two trucks, but even that space didn't appear large enough. She pushed the accelerator to the floor and the car squeezed into the narrow gap.

The lower corner of the semi's trailer tore the driver's side mirror off the little hatchback while the undercarriage of the moving van snapped off the radio antenna and struck a glancing blow to the corner post of the passenger side window. A

spider web pattern suddenly appeared across the right side of the windshield as the glass cracked. The speed of the little car began to drop off rapidly as it scraped its way between the thundering trucks.

The car was barely moving fifty-one miles an hour when suddenly the moving van jerked closer to the shoulder, enlarging the space between the two trucks. Freed from the vise-like grip, the little yellow hatchback picked up speed and passed the two cursing truck drivers.

Throughout the entire ordeal, Sissy and Joel had held on to each other and remained silent.

"Yea, Mommy!" yelled Joel, triumphantly.

Alice leaned on the steering wheel and looked at her brave little boy.

"Yea, Joel," she responded in an exhausted voice.

"Mom, look!" cried Sissy, pointing through the shattered windshield. "There's a police car up ahead."

Alice pushed the pedal to the floor. "Hang on, kids. It's time to get a speeding ticket."

Officer Berry Walker and his partner, Frank Sheppard, looked at each other as the yellow hatchback sped by them doing eighty miles an hour.

"That's the trouble with to-

day's world," said Frank as he flipped on the lights and siren. "We get no respect."

Alice wound down her window as the squad car pulled up behind. She stuck her arm out and motioned for the policemen to pull alongside.

"Fold up Charlie's note and give it to me," said Alice. Sissy obeyed quickly.

As the police car with its two confused officers came alongside, Alice held the piece of paper out. The policeman on the passenger side reached over and took it from her hand.

At first, Berry and Frank couldn't believe what they were reading, but after they called in the license number of the hatchback and realized they were dealing with the ex-wife of a known gangland enforcer, there was little doubt that the threat was real. Just what they could do about it, they didn't know. They called for assistance and then pulled the patrol car ahead of the hatchback to clear the highway ahead.

Alice looked at the gas gauge. The needle was resting just above "E."

"Sissy, take my lipstick out of my purse and write 'gas' in big letters on the windshield."

"But the glass is all cracked."

"That's okay. The policemen will still be able to read it."

"Hey, what's that kid writing on the glass?" asked Frank, looking back.

Berry glanced up in the rear view mirror. "It's backwards writing to you. Look at it in your side mirror."

Frank turned and looked in his mirror. "Oh, no. She must be running out of gas. What the hell we gonna do now?"

Berry pulled into the left lane and slowed down to allow the hatchback to pass. "We're going to push her."

Frank's eyes grew big. "At fifty miles an hour?"

"No, fifty-five. We need a five-mile-an-hour margin of safety."

"What happens when *we* run out of gas?"

Berry looked over at his partner. "Ka-boom," he said, flatly.

Frank picked up the microphone and switched to the P.A. speaker to explain the plan to the driver of the hatchback.

Alice felt the gentle thump as the front bumper of the patrol car contacted the rear of the hatchback. She took the car out of gear and switched the engine off and then quickly switched to the "accessory" position to keep the steering wheel from locking. Alice breathed a sigh

of relief when she saw the speedometer continue to register fifty-five miles an hour.

"Why'd you turn off the engine, Mom?" asked Sissy.

"We've got to save what little gas we have left, honey."

"Why? Do you have an idea?"

"Yes, darling. I have an idea."

She gave her daughter a reassuring smile. Inside, she wanted to scream.

She realized it wasn't much of a plan and the odds were against her. She knew they would be passing the beach area in a few minutes. She planned to turn off and drive the car into the ocean on the slim hope the bomb and triggering mechanism would fail in the salt water before it detonated. She realized the speed would drop quickly to zero when they hit the water and it was more likely that the bomb would work or, worse still, they might drown. Still, the plan was the best she could come up with at the moment.

When the beaches appeared off to the left, she restarted the engine and raced it as she slowly let off the clutch. A wave of her hand and the patrol car began to back away. She was on her own.

"Brace yourselves, kids," she said as she slowed to fifty-two and turned off at the exit ramp. The ramp veered sharply to the

right and the car skidded sideways into the curb. Two wheels jumped the curb and the car ran over a thin metal pole that marked the ramp for snow plows during the winter months. Alice jammed the accelerator to the floor and fought the steering wheel. Suddenly, steam appeared from under the hood. The overtemp warning light flickered and then shone bright red. The pole had punctured the radiator.

As the car left the ramp, it regained the highway leading straight to the beach. The hatchback became airborne briefly as it leaped a small mound separating the road from the beach. The rear hatch suddenly popped open as they came down on the beach. Black smoke began to mix with the steam coming from under the hood. Still, Alice held the gas pedal to the floor.

"Yippee!" yelled Joel.

Out of the corner of her eye, Alice spotted an answer to her silent prayers. She cut the steering wheel sharply to the right. The car slid sideways in the soft sand and began to slow. Still, the wheels were spinning at a furious rate and the speedometer was reading eighty even though they were only moving at about forty miles an hour.

She jerked the wheel suddenly to the left. The right rear

tire struck a partially buried log and exploded. Then slowly the little hatchback began to climb the sand dune Alice had spotted earlier.

"Sissy, undo both your seat belts and get ready to jump!" screamed Alice over the roar of the dying engine.

As the driving wheels buried themselves in the soft sand of the dune, the car slowed to a stop. The smell of burning rubber filled the car as the tires spun wildly in the sand. The speedometer was indicating seventy and dropping rapidly.

"Get out!" yelled Alice. "Get your brother out of the car and run. Hurry!"

Sissy reached across her brother and pushed at the passenger door. Sand piled up outside prevented it from opening.

"Go out the rear hatch," yelled Alice as she pushed harder on the gas pedal and lifted Joel over the back of the front seat. The speedometer read sixty. The engine began to miss and sputter.

"Mommy, Mommy, come on!" shouted Joel, half turning as Sissy pulled him away from the smoking vehicle.

Alice pushed at the driver's door with all her strength. Slowly, she forced it open. She

could see the patrol car sitting farther up the beach obviously stuck. The two policemen were running toward her. She glanced at the speedometer. Fifty-three. They wouldn't reach her in time.

Quickly, she picked her purse up off the floor and wedged it between the gas and brake pedals, then carefully removed her foot from the accelerator. The speedometer had dropped to fifty-one.

She jumped from the car and tumbled down the side of the dune.

The force of the explosion sent a huge plume of sand skyward. A large fireball appeared from the center of the cloud of sand and raced upward. Alice covered herself as smoldering pieces of the hatchback landed around her.

When the blast had subsided, Alice struggled wearily to her feet and staggered over to Sissy and Joel. She dropped to her knees and took them both in her arms. "You guys all right?"

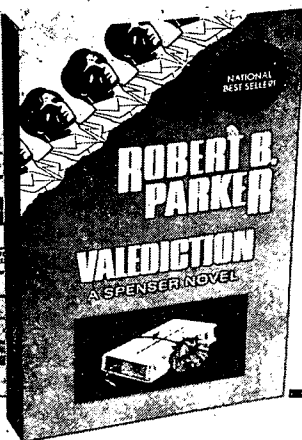
"Wow!" responded Joel.

"We're fine, Mom," said Sissy.

"Are we still going to Mr. Happyland?" asked Joel.

Alice laughed. "No way, hotshot. Today you guys are all mine." And she hugged them a little harder.

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The Scales of Justice

by Al and Mary Kuhfeld



There was a knock on the door. George Grimby put his cards face down and went upstairs to answer it while the other four players waited.

"I'm not sure about this, an outsider at our game . . ." Pederson said, taking the opportunity to rearrange his hand.

"C'mon, poker isn't poker without five players," said Nygaard. "Thorpe couldn't make it, and with due respect to our host, Grimby ain't but half a

player at best, even when he does take a hand." Nygaard noted Pederson's rearranging and looked complacently at his own hand.

Balstad was at the small refrigerator, getting a beer. "We can use some fresh blood at the table. We've been playing together so long I think we're getting stale."

The door slammed upstairs, and a gust of arctic air came down and wrapped itself around

Illustration by Peter D. Fasolino

the ankles of the poker players. Boots clumped and feet clattered on the stairs; Grimby was back, bringing with him a broad bulldog of a man. The man's eyes swept the room, and Nygaard was suddenly aware that while Grimby's basement rec room was warm and clean, its decor could best be described as Early Suburban Bad Taste. Plaster plaques featuring bathroom humor and mother-in-law cracks were hung on the imitation wood paneling, and the acetate curtains featured pink and black poodles. The object that came closest to good taste was a bad reproduction of a classic painting of five poker-playing dogs. Grimby had tacked it to the wall behind his tiny bar.

The newcomer's face fell subtly as he looked about. A high roller, I bet, thought Nygaard, who thinks he's fallen among yokels.

But the man made a quick recovery and flashed a grin as brilliant as the diamond in his pinky ring. "Hi, I'm Larry Fields. Sports equipment is my game, and I wish I'd brought my snowshoes with me." He gestured at his snow-covered shoes and laughed. "I'm from Chicago, the windy city. But it usually blows wet this time of year, not white." He took off a pinch-brim hat and shook snow off it.

"We're enough farther north to make a difference, all right," said Pederson. "Coat rack is back in the hall."

"Thanks."

The men returned to their hand. It was a friendly poker game, and they played with a minimum of words and gestures, the way people do who have spent many hours in each other's company. Strangers were rarely invited to sit in, but as Nygaard had pointed out, Grimby preferred the role of host and poker isn't poker without five players. And as Balstad had noted, play was slow as much because the players were stale as because the cards were cold. Anyway, Ken Olson, desk clerk at the Valhalla Inn, had vouched for Fields, and he was a fair judge of character.

Draxten folded; Pederson and Nygaard called, and Grimby won with a pair of jacks.

"Rats." Pederson dropped his cards in front of him and began to nudge them away with a forefinger. Nygaard was reminded of a terrier. "A lousy pair of jacks," Pederson said, and scratched restlessly behind an ear. "There hasn't been a decent hand yet."

"Give it time, the cards haven't warmed up yet," said Nygaard. "We've only been playing an hour."

"They may have been a lousy pair of jacks," said Grimby as

he raked in the chips. "But they were my jacks, and they were good enough to beat you. And on that note, Larry, here, take the luckiest seat in the house."

Fields came back from hanging up his coat and took the chair Grimby had vacated, between Pederson and Draxten. "What's a buy-in gonna cost me?" he asked.

"Fifty dollars cash," said Pederson.

"Fifty?" Fields, wallet in hand, looked disappointed.

"We prefer a friendly game to mayhem-on-the-halfshell, Mr. Fields," said Draxten with finality. Steady, sober, tenacious, Draxten spoke like the Saint Bernard nanny in Peter Pan.

Fields pulled two twenties and a ten out of a fat wallet and handed them over with a shrug. "Yeah, well, fifty bucks ain't patty-cake, either."

Why am I all of a sudden seeing everyone as a dog? thought Nygaard. Pederson's a terrier, Fields is a bulldog, Draxten is a Saint Bernard—and, by God, Balstad would make a good poodle with that bright red sweater and his curly blond hair. Interesting. Amused at this flight of fancy, but not wishing to be asked about it, he covered a grin with a massive hand—and his eye was caught by the print behind the bar. There they were, the poodle,

terrier, bulldog, and Saint Bernard—and a Great Dane. I'll have to be the Great Dane, I guess. Pity it isn't a Norwegian elkhound. Nygaard, like any Son of Norway, knew the difference between Danes and Norwegians.

Pederson took Fields's money and gave him a handful of chips and a rundown on the house rules. "Whites are one, reds five, and blues ten dollars. There's a ten dollar limit on raises. Hands are dealer's choice. No sandbagging; and any faced card is dead unless the dealer is giving it to himself. A dollar comes out of every pot to help our host meet expenses."

Fields played conservatively the first several hands, taking the measure of his fellow players and learning the rest of the house rules. He was a restless man, considering his bulk. "I'm a smoker," he confessed halfway through his fourth hand, when he saw Nygaard's awareness of his fidgets, "but none of you seems to smoke, and I'm willing to fight the habit for a few hours if that's the only way I get to play. Will we break for dinner?"

"Huh-uh, game's over at six today," said Balstad. "Big lodge doing this evening."

Fields again looked disappointed, but said, "Fine."

It was Balstad's deal. "Seven card stud, gentlemen," he an-

nounced. "Ante up." There was a gentle clattering of white chips into the ante. Fields snatched up his hole cards, fondled them lovingly, glanced at Nygaard, put them down, knocked over his chips, and began a careless restacking of them. But his eyes wandered around the table, watching the players.

Nygaard glanced at his own hole cards: king of clubs and seven of hearts; then looked up to see the king of spades land face up in front of him. Nobody else showed anything higher than a ten. His attention was so distracted by Fields, he forgot he preferred not to scare off the other players. He tossed in three white chips: "Open for three."

"I quit," said Balstad. "When Thor bets three this early, he's got at least another king in the hole." Balstad, like most poodles, was easily intimidated.

Draxten, who had the ten of hearts, maintained a saintly silence as he met the bet.

"I'm in," said Fields. He had been holding his hole cards again, playing with them. He picked up three white chips and tossed them in.

Which brought it to Pederson. He had a four and five of clubs showing. "You're bluffing, Thor, I can tell," he said.

Nygaard shrugged indifferently.

"I can beat whatever you've got, I guess," said Pederson. He picked up a red chip and tossed it into the center with terrier bravado.

Fields "milked" the two cards in his hand, pulling the top one off and sliding it under the other, over and over. He looked at them as if worried they'd changed color in the last minute, pulled his nose, sniffed hard, and put them face down on the table. But Nygaard, a keen people-watcher, noticed that Fields's eyes kept glancing around the table as well.

"You gonna sit there all afternoon?" demanded Pederson.

"Huh? Oh." Nygaard had gotten so interested in trying to figure Fields out that he'd failed to notice it was his turn again. He consulted his cards and, with a show of reluctance, put another two dollars into the pot to call the bet. Fields and Draxten also called. Balstad dealt each of the remaining players another card.

Nygaard won the hand with three kings, being distracted enough by Fields not to overplay his nonchalance, his usual giveaway to a good hand.

Later, when Pederson was dealing seven card stud, he remarked as he began the last round of cards, "Down and dirty."

"I love it when you talk poker to us," leered Balstad, and Fields's rich chortle contrasted pleasantly with Pederson's high yelp of laughter.

But Fields's play remained erratic, and Nygaard, while chuckling at Balstad's comeback, could not have told anyone who challenged him what it had been, so interested was he in watching Fields. He wondered what Fields was up to; the man was slipping red chips through his heavy fingers—his second buy-in of the afternoon. He'd been losing steadily, and making some novicelike plays. But he knew the jargon of the regular poker player, and he was good at bluffing.

Nygaard consulted his hole cards. He'd managed to weave his covert study of the newcomer into his game now. He had four kings, two of the wild cards—Pederson liked the excitement of wild cards—but still, a very good hand. Shaking his head as if in serious doubt, he shoved a blue chip and a red chip towards the middle, raising five. He wanted badly to raise ten, but if he did, he might scare Pederson off.

Fields had had to buy more chips again. But if he was hanging in there, so were his fidgets. When he wasn't fooling with his cards, he was messing with his chips. He was full of "tells,"

licking his lips and shifting in his chair as if anticipating a big win, or wiping an eye as if concerned about the poverty of his cards. Yet these motions rarely connected with how he played a hand, or its results. Nygaard had about given up, deciding that so long as Fields was losing, he was easy to put up with.

About four thirty, Fields asked, "How about we bring it up to pot limit on raises? I mean, I don't want to quack, but I'd like to get well before we go home—I've had to buy back in twice already."

He sure knows a lot of poker terms for a man who plays that poorly, thought Nygaard. But Fields was grinning with just that hint of embarrassment that meant sincerity, and Nygaard shrugged. "Dealer's choice."

Draxten glanced down at the stacks of chips in front of him—he'd been playing stolid, consistent, winning poker all afternoon—and said, "Fine."

"That can get a little rich for my blood," said Balstad uncomfortably.

"I'm for it," said Pederson—boldly, considering how far behind he was. "If you're scared, Balstad, you can change it back when it's your deal."

"Well—" said Balstad.

"Oh-kay," said Fields, with an air of rubbing his hands together. "Five card draw, gentlemen, nothing wild."

He took that pot, which amounted to nearly a hundred dollars, folded when Pederson dealt, lost a small amount on the hand Nygaard dealt, folded after the draw on Balstad's deal, and won handily from Draxten.

He called for pot limit again on his deal. After the draw, Nygaard, who failed to improve a pair of queens, summoned his considerable acting ability and bluffed so well everyone but Fields folded. Fields just grinned and kept raising back, and won with three fives. Nygaard frowned; three fives was a poor hand to back that heavily. Why had he been so damn sure he had Nygaard beat? He thought that over as the deal moved around the table twice. Fields was playing very well indeed right now, winning when he stayed, folding when he should. He again folded promptly when it was Pederson's deal. Nygaard's frown deepened: Fields seemed to fold every time Pederson dealt. And Pederson always announced that deuces or one-eyed jacks or even deuces and treys were wild. What did Fields have against wild cards?

"Grimby, bring us another deck, will you?" asked Nygaard when the deck came to him. "I've been drawing too many runts with this deck."

"Sure."

Nygaard opened the box, removed the jokers, and shuffled

thoroughly. Pederson cut and Nygaard announced, "Five card draw; five dollar limit on raises—" he was approaching the sum he would allow himself to lose and did not want to be forced out of the game just yet—"nothing wild. Ante up."

Fields's mannerisms seemed to gain new vigor with this game. He fiddled incessantly with his cards, rearranging their order again and again. He pursed his lips and whistled softly, glanced at the other players frequently, and when he caught Nygaard's eye on him, he began to break down and restack his chips with an air of impatience. Not impatience to bet; he stayed with apparent reluctance, not raising. When Nygaard called for discards, Fields pulled three random cards from his hand. "Three, please," he said, tossing them down.

"Give me two good ones," begged Balstad.

"One," said Draxten.

"I'll take three," said Pederson.

"And dealer takes two," said Nygaard, handing around replacements. "What do you bet, Larry?"

Fields picked up some chips without looking, counting them as he dropped them into the middle. "One, two, three, four dollars," he said, and began again to rearrange his cards.

"Possible straight, possible flush: Nothing," muttered Balstad, putting his cards down. "I'll fold."

"I'm in," said Pederson, adding his four chips to the pot.

Draxten said, "Eight," raising the bet four dollars.

Nygaard saw the eight and raised five. He had barely any idea of what was in his hand; he was too busy keeping covert eyes on Fields's every fidget. "Up to you, Larry," he said.

Fields glanced at Nygaard, then at Draxten. "Oh, I think I'll fold." He closed his cards like a fan and dropped them.

"I'll see Thor's five and—" began Pederson.

"Hold it," said Nygaard. He reached out and picked up Fields's cards, including his previous discards. "I want to take a look at something."

"Hey, you can't do that; the hand isn't over!" said Pederson.

"Anyhow it's against the rules to look at a folded hand," chimed in Balstad.

"Which rules? Ours, or the ones this joker's been playing by?" The atmosphere in the room abruptly altered.

"Careful, Thor," cautioned Draxten.

"You'd better not be saying what I think you're saying," blustered Fields.

Nygaard called across the room, "Grimby, where's our old deck?"

Grimby, looking scared, went behind the bar and produced it.

Nygaard took the old deck and went quickly through it, pulling out the aces and face cards. He handed them to Balstad. "Mark, shuffle these and lay them out face down on the table for me."

"Sure, all right. But I hope to God you know what you're doing." Balstad riffled them a couple of times and laid them out on Nygaard's side of the pot.

Meanwhile, Nygaard examined the cards Fields had handled in this last hand. "You threw away an ace, jack, queen, I see," he said. "That wasn't very bright."

"So?" said Fields, but he sounded wary.

"And you drew another queen. And a ten and a trey."

"Yeah, I kept my two hearts; I was after a flush, see?"

The players frowned; that was so stupid even a beginner wouldn't do it.

Nygaard turned the ace, jack, and queens over and got very interested in their backs, and then in the long edges of the cards from the old deck. After a while he straightened and smiled. "Want to see a magic trick?" he asked. He reached out and touched the backs of four cards in the set Balstad had laid out.

"Those are the queens," he said, and turned them over

to prove himself correct.

"Jesus sufferin' Christ!" exclaimed Balstad.

Nygaard said to Fields, "All those wriggles and fussing were to cover your marking of the cards, right? And you switched from fooling with your cards to fooling with your chips whenever you saw me paying attention to you."

"You're a goddam liar!" said Fields.

"Am I? I noticed you started folding whenever the dealer called some cards wild—you couldn't read a fistful of wild cards, could you? There wasn't going to be time to mark all the cards, so you marked only the face cards—and the aces," said Nygaard, and he turned over four more cards from the old deck, all aces.

Pederson yapped, "Cheat! You lousy cheater!"

"Don't say cheat to me!" said Fields. "He's the one who can read the cards from the back!"

"No, sir," said Nygaard, "that dog won't bark. This is a new deck, and I learned how to read the marks from the cards you were holding, cards I held only long enough to put in front of you and never saw the faces of."

"How do you read them, Thor?" asked Balstad.

"Look here, see these little notches on the edges of the cards? Aces notched near the top, kings down a way, queens

farther down, and jacks near the bottom. I think we should take a look at his fingernails to see if one is filed sharp, or maybe at that big ring he's wearing, to see if it's got a raised edge on its underside."

Fields stood, his face a deep red. "Don't you touch my ring! This is some kind of stickup, isn't it? You'll pretend to find a rough spot and keep the ring. Well, you won't get away with it! This is a nine hundred dollar ring, and if you take it away from me, I'll have the law on you, see if I don't!"

For some reason, this made everyone in the room laugh. "What's so stinkin' funny?" demanded Fields.

Nygaard, grinning fiercely, said, "Maybe we should introduce ourselves again. I'm Detective Sergeant Thor Nygaard, Hedeby police. The man with the furry sweater is Mark Balstad, our county prosecutor. Nils Pederson, the yappy one there, is about as good a criminal defense lawyer as Hedeby has. And the big, sad-eyed cuss, the man with the second-highest pile of chips, is Tillman Draxten, judge of District Court."

Fields's deep color faded to a pasty white. "This is crazy," he whispered. Then, louder, "What kind of crazy town is this? This is an illegal game!"

"Yeah, we know," said Nygaard. "That's why we have to

hide out in old Grimby's basement whenever we want to play it."

"Well, then, you know you can't arrest a man for cheating in an illegal game of chance."

"He's right, you know," Prosecutor Balstad said. "I would never take him into court."

"And if he did, I could defend him with one hand tied behind my back," added Attorney Pederson.

"And I'd dismiss the charges," said Judge Draxten.

"There, see?" said Fields. "So you caught me, so what? Take my winnings, give me the hundred and fifty I came in with, and I'll be on my way." He began to reach for his chips.

But a large hand seized his wrist in a mighty grip. Fields dropped the blue chips he had picked up, twisted around, and saw the largest man in the room looming over him.

"Keep your fat hands off the table!" Nygaard said.

"Haul him out in back and rough him up some, Thor," suggested Grimby, who had gone behind his bar for a child's baseball bat. He let it smack into the palm of one hand. "I'll help, if you want me to."

Fields snarled, "All right, all right; keep all the money! It's highway robbery, but keep the money! Now let go!"

"No," said Nygaard. He was very angry, his clenched face

threateningly close to Fields's.

"Settle down, Thor," said Balstad nervously.

"Why should he settle down?" asked Pederson, who had been the big loser that afternoon.

"Hold it," growled Draxten, with his judge's authority. The others looked at him. "Let's not be hasty, or do something illegal. The man is a cheat, obviously. However, he's been caught before he made away with our money. I think we should separate him from that amount he won from us by cheating and ship him off. What do you think, Mr. Balstad?"

"Sounds fair to me."

"I think we should sit him down and make him eat those marked cards!" said Pederson.

Draxten consulted his watch. "We haven't got time for that. It's after six and we have to be at the lodge by seven thirty in good bib and tucker."

Balstad stood. "Is it as late as that?" He lived well outside of town, and the snowy roads would slow travel. He began to gather his chips. "Cash me in, Nils. You guys will have to decide what to do with our friend here without my help. Fine him everything he's got on the table and let him go; that's my advice." He changed his chips into forty-seven dollars in cash and left.

"I still think we should rough him up some," said Grimby

hopefully. He had moved to guard the door, baseball bat in hand.

"Don't do anything to him that will leave a mark," advised Pederson, the lawyer. "Or he might sue."

"That money on the table," said Fields, "is all the money I've got."

"Crap!" barked Pederson. "There's more cash in your wallet; I saw it when you bought in the second time. And you've got more credit cards than the rest of us put together."

"Just once," said Grimby. "Hit him just one time. Or let me hit him."

"Shut up, Grimby," said Nygaard.

"Let him go, Thor," said Draxten.

"Think of something mean, legal, and appropriate to do to him and I will."

"I don't think there is such an action," said Draxten. "If you can think of something yourself, be my guest. And on that note, I take my leave. Cash me in, Nils. And if you want a ride home, you'll have to leave with me now."

Pederson hesitated, torn. "Oh, all right," he said. "Give me your chips. Thor, let me know what you decide, okay?"

"Sure."

Pederson cashed all the chips, and left with Draxten. Then, except for Grimby, Nygaard

was alone in the basement room with his captive.

"Grimby, can I use your phone?" Nygaard asked.

"Sure. Are you going to hit him or not?"

"Naw, I'm so mad I might accidentally kill him. Then there'd be a stink."

"Hide him outdoors, and he won't stink until next spring," said Grimby, grinning. But he decided Nygaard wasn't going to do anything worth watching, at least right then, so he said, "I got to go shower and change for the dinner. See you there?"

"Yeah," said Nygaard absently, hanging on to Fields with one hand and dialing with the other. "Hello, Jack? It's me, Thor."

Jack Hafner was Nygaard's partner in the squad room, and a cool head. However, when he heard Nygaard's complaint, he only laughed. "I'm with the judge on this one, Thor," he said. "I don't think there's anything you can do but turn him loose."

Nygaard said something rude about Jack's lack of imagination and hung up. He said to Fields, "Maybe I should put you outside in your stocking feet. And drop your car keys down a storm drain, if I could find one under the snow."

"You do that, or leave any kind of mark of violence on me," threatened Fields, "and by God,

"I'll go to your newspaper with the story of this poker setup you've got here, and everyone will suffer."

"Those would be serious charges," agreed Nygaard, considering the threat. "And there'd be an investigation. We'd have to hold you as a material witness. And who knows how long it would take to bring in an outside judge?"

Fields grinned. "Yeah, but in the end you'd lose your badge. I think we got us a Mexican standoff here." Fields offered a carrot. "Look, keep the money. In fact, let me add fifty dollars to it. You don't have to share it; you can always say you gave it back to me. I'll leave town tonight, I promise, and no one will ever know."

"An offer of bribery is even stupider than trying to cheat us," Nygaard said, his fjord-blue eyes taking on a frosty paleness. He picked up the money and put it in his pocket for later distribution. "You're leaving all right," he added, "and I want to make sure you never come back." The ambiguity of this statement reduced Fields to a frightened silence.

"Thor, for Pete's sake, you can't bring him in here!" hissed Balstad. "For one thing, he hasn't got a ticket! And for another, he isn't Nor-

wegian!"

"Hush up, Mark, okay? He's my guest. We're allowed to bring a guest to a lodge dinner, aren't we? And since Judy's working in the kitchen tonight, I'm bringing my buddy Mr. Fields along." He grinned down at the man, large teeth shining. "It'll give me more time to think of something mean, appropriate, and maybe even legal."

Fields had given up arguing. He looked tired and a little depressed; even the diamond in his ring seemed dim. Nygaard had taken him to his home and handcuffed him to the refrigerator while showering and changing, and driven him to the lodge hall at a rate of speed Fields had privately considered far too fast for road conditions. Nygaard was now acting more out of stubbornness than anger, Fields knew. But Fields recalled the look in the big man's eye when he offered the bribe, and did not care to inadvertently rekindle that look.

The elevator door slid open, and the smell of something warm and damp rolled in.

"What the hell is that?" said Fields, hanging back.

"What?" asked Nygaard, pulling him out of the elevator.

"That smell."

"What smell?"

"It's lutefisk," said Balstad, uncovering his curls as if in a gesture of respect. He inhaled

greedily. "Torsk."

"Torsk?"

"That's Norwegian for cod."

"Come on, this way," said Nygaard impatiently. He led them down a hallway to a door guarded by a pleasant-faced woman counting dollar bills and putting rubber bands around little stacks of them.

"Well, hello, Thor Nygaard," she said. "I was wondering if you'd get here on time." There was an odd lilt in her voice, as if it were carried on little waves.

"Inga, how could I not be here, knowing you'd be at the door to greet me?" He showed her a yellow pasteboard ticket.

She blushed and waved dismissively at him. "Go on with you," she said. "And save that for the drawing next week."

"Any tickets left?"

She looked in her metal box. "Yes, three or four."

"Good, my friend wants some real old fashioned Norwegian food."

Nygaard nudged Fields, who reached for his wallet. "How much?" he asked.

"Seven dollars and fifty cents," she said. He paid her, and was rewarded with a yellow ticket. "What's your last name?" she asked curiously.

"Fields."

"Oh, then it's your mother who's from Norway?"

"No—uh, yes," he amended, as he felt another massive

nudge. "Uh—Johannsen was her name."

She frowned. "Johannsen is Swedish, isn't it?"

"Uh, yeah, but they moved to Norway before she was born."

"Ah, then welcome to Tofte Lodge," she smiled, and handed him his change.

"Thank you," said Fields.

The room was crowded with people, many of them tall, most of them fair, quite a few carrying frosty glasses that tinkled refreshingly. Fields noticed a bar in the corner. "I could use a drink," he hinted, but Nygaard was looking for familiar faces, and greeting them with waves and grins.

A big man with a huge red mustache confronted Nygaard and said belligerently through a haze of whisky fumes, "I hear we're gonna have to discontinue our 911 emergency phone number."

"Why's that, Sven?" asked Nygaard.

"'Cause none of us Norwegians can find eleven on the dial!"

Fields braced himself for an explosion, but when it came, it was laughter. Thor slapped the man on his shoulder and shouted, "Haw, haw, haw! I'll have to remember that one!" He nudged Fields, who gave an obliging and puzzled chuckle.

A very proper looking young woman came by and told a sur-

prisingly raunchy joke involving Ole and Lena, which again insulted Norwegians. And again Nygaard laughed his big laugh.

Fields waited until the young woman went away, and asked, "If you're all Norwegians, how come you're not telling German jokes? Or whatever."

"Danish jokes," said Nygaard. "Sometimes we tell Danish jokes. But mostly we tell jokes on ourselves."

"I don't get it."

"Well, we'd tell Polish jokes," said Nygaard, "except we don't understand them." And he laughed his great haw, haw, haw. Still grinning, Nygaard looked down at Fields. "You know, you look sorta like a guy the police in International Falls are looking for. Maybe I should keep you down at the jail until they can come check it out, which could take four or five days if the snow keeps up like the weatherman says it might. That would be legal."

Fields ventured a suggestion that that might constitute false arrest.

"Naw, more like mistaken identity, I think. Of course, on the other hand, if Tommy Olson has to come all the way down here on a false alarm, he's gonna be mad at me. And if he stays mad, he might not let me use his cabin in the Boundary Waters next summer. And what would I do if I couldn't fish for

walleyes in the Boundary Waters?" With a massive, regretful sigh, Nygaard dropped that idea. He renewed his grip on the unfortunate gambler's arm, and they worked their way slowly toward the double doors at the back of the reception area. The smell of something that had been forcibly removed from the sea, and cruelly treated besides, grew stronger.

Fields murmured apologetically, "I really don't much care for fish." As if in sympathy, a low moaning sound filled the room and stilled all conversation.

"There goes the lur-horn," said Nygaard happily. "Let's eat!"

The dining hall was very large, and its two longer walls were lined with thin horizontal slats of wood that curved upwards at one end, giving the impression the room was inside an enormous longboat. Several dozen tables covered with white paper tablecloths filled the floor. On an unslatted wall straight ahead was a big American flag flanked by two Norwegian flags, which in turn were flanked by murderous-looking battle-axes crossed behind brass-knobbed shields.

"Everybody in town must be Norwegian, to support a place

this big," said Fields.

"Yeah, there's a lot of us all right," said Nygaard, leading Fields to a table near the front. "Say, do you sell snowmobile suits?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then what are you doing in Minnesota? Snowmobile suits are practically a winter uniform up here. What kind of a sporting goods company do you work for, anyhow?"

"A very good sporting goods company." Fields smelled—in addition to the fish—another of Nygaard's screwball plans in the making. "Are you in the market for a snowmobile suit?"

"No, I got one. But you spoiled my next plan. I was thinking, suppose your luggage accidentally got mixed up with someone else's? And it got put on the bus Valhalla runs up to the Twin Cities international airport. And ended up in, say, Cancun, Mexico? You might be grateful for a snowmobile suit to wear until the airline got your luggage back."

"How would you get hold of my luggage without breaking into my hotel room? The management might not think much of that. They might put a lot of pressure on the police department to solve the burglary."

"Yeah, they might at that," said Nygaard, and Fields offered an inaudible sigh of relief.

They took seats at a table set

for six with white china plates and thick coffee mugs. The smell of fish was now very strong indeed. Nygaard waved an arm over his head, and they were joined by Judge Draxten and his wife, a tiny lady with grey eyes and hair.

"I would have thought you'd have gotten rid of Mr. Fields by now," said Draxten, as they sat down.

"Tillman, what a rude thing to say!" said Mrs. Draxten. "I think it was very kind of Sergeant Nygaard to bring him along for a taste of old-country cooking."

"Hamburgers would've been fine," muttered Fields, not quietly enough. A massive elbow nudged his ribs and he added hastily, "But I'm looking forward to an interesting meal."

There was an electronic shriek, and all eyes turned to the front of the room, where a podium stood in a spotlight under the American flag. A tall man with golden hair was adjusting the microphone. Beside him stood a tiny girl in a pink dress.

"Hello!" he said, and his voice was broadcast with ear-shattering faithfulness to the farthest reaches of the room. Hands flew to ears. He frowned, and when he spoke again, his voice had been reduced to a scant whisper. His lips moved, and they heard, at a near-proper volume,

"...two, three, testing, one, two. There, that's better. Welcome to the Tofte Lodge Lute-fisk Dinner. The cooks inform me all is in readiness, so without further ado, I will present little Astrid, who will recite for us." He bent and lifted the child, whose hair was so fair it glowed almost white under the spotlight. She clutched the microphone, pulling herself horizontal, then saw how many eyes were on her and lost her nerve.

"Go on, honey," called someone from a table near her, and she rewarded him with a shy smile.

"Okay," she said, took a deep breath, and recited all in a rush, *"I Jesus' Navn gar gi til bords, Spider, drikker pa dit ord, Dig til aere, od til gavn, Sa far vi mat i Jesus' Navn."*

Fields suddenly saw that he was the only one in the room whose head was not bowed. They were saying grace, he realized, and when Nygaard nudged him, he said "Amen," loudly.

Their waiter came by and put two platters on the table, one stacked with whitish squares, thin and limp; the other piled with pale freckled rectangles the size of graham crackers.

"Flatbread," said Nygaard, picking up one of the cracker-like rectangles. "Made of oat-meal. Try one."

Fields tasted a piece. Its texture was rather like cardboard found under a bush after a long winter, but it didn't taste bad.

The limp things didn't taste bad either, nor good; they had virtually no taste at all. "Lefse, potato bread," Mrs. Draxten said as she showed him how to fold it into a triangle and spread butter on it. "A little sugar is good, too," she counseled, sprinkling some on hers.

Fields copied her, and agreed it improved the flavor. His spirits rose a little. This might not be such a bad meal after all.

"Obviously your mother didn't do much Norwegian cooking at your house," Mrs. Draxten said.

"No, ma'am."

"Too bad," said Nygaard. "No one prepares fish like the Scandinavians do."

"Which is probably why our ancestors went a-viking," said a voice behind them.

"Jack!" said Nygaard, turning in his chair.

Hafner, a trimly built man with dark hair and gray eyes, stood smiling down at them. "May I have this empty chair, or are you saving it for someone?" he asked.

"Sit, sit down!" said Nygaard.

Hafner sat and grinned. "And you would be Mr. Fields? I thought Thor would have sent you on your way by now."

"No, I haven't," said Nygaard. "Not yet. Maybe I should

take him to a tattoo parlor to get a shark tattooed on to the back of each of his hands. Or would that be leaving a mark?"

Hafner laughed and Mrs. Draxten asked, "Why a shark?"

Judge Draxten said, "He's a cardshark; we caught him cheating at poker this afternoon."

Mrs. Draxten fixed Fields with an eye turned the color of a winter sea. "I hope you are ashamed of yourself, sir."

"Well, I suppose I am," said Fields, glancing in Nygaard's direction.

A waiter in a dark suit carefully lowered an enormous platter piled high with slabs of something that smelled of old fishing nets onto the place of honor at the center of the table. The lutefisk had arrived. Nygaard deftly captured the biggest piece for himself, and courteously insisted that Fields take the second biggest.

Hafner asked, "What do you know about lutefisk, Mr. Fields?"

Fields, frowning at the quivering whiteness on his plate, replied, "Not a thing."

"It's an interesting food, made from ocean cod. Goes back at least to medieval times, before refrigeration. After the fish is caught, it's salted down, then dried. It can last for months that way. When you get a yen for fish and it's too cold to go

fishing, you bring out the lutefisk. But it's stiff as a board, so you soak it in a lye bath to soften it up. That breaks down the tissue and melts the bones right into jelly. When you can feel your fingers with your thumb right through a slab of fish, it's almost ready. Then put it in fresh water for a day or two to get rid of the lye, boil it a few hours just to make sure it's really soft, and serve it up just like you see it here. Nice, huh? That piece of fish on your plate there was caught last summer and never saw a refrigerator in its life."

"No kidding," said Fields, looking at the very large chunk of lutefisk Nygaard had given him. Beside him, Nygaard was pouring melted butter over his portion. Nygaard was not denying the description, not breaking into his big haw, haw, haw to show this was a joke.

"Delicious!" said Thor, forking away a huge mouthful. "Eat up, Larry!" Fields felt a big elbow land in his ribs.

He took a small bite and discovered the questionable pleasures of fish-flavored jelly. "Pass the butter, please," he said miserably.

"Here come the potatoes!" said Nygaard. Norwegian-style potatoes are boiled until they begin to break apart, then shaken in a colander until they are dry and mealy. But they are

not treated with lye and don't taste of fish. Fields took two, anxious to clear his palate.

Another bowl arrived. "Ah, the mashed rutabagas," said Hafner, "cooked in pork-flavored milk."

Before Fields could say, "None for me, please," Nygaard had put a large dollop on his plate.

"You get your money's worth at Tofte Lodge!" Nygaard said cheerfully, taking an enormous serving for himself. "Eat, Larry; you may never get a meal like this again."

Fields, with a staggering effort, ate most of his fish and half his rutabagas. "I—I guess I'm not very hungry," he said when he saw Nygaard's censoring eye.

"I'm not surprised," said Mrs. Draxten. "Sitting here among all these nice people. You belong in jail."

"Sergeant Nygaard suggested that, but I'm afraid I talked him out of it," sighed Fields.

Nygaard glanced over and said, "I knew you'd like it once you tried it; here, have some more lutefisk." He put another piece on Fields's plate with the careless largess of a man who has already paid for all he can get. He added a slab to his own plate and reached for the little pitcher of melted butter. It was a fresh pitcher, and hot, and he dropped it hard enough to spill

a molten puddle onto the paper tablecloth. "*Uff da!*" he said.

"*Uff da?*" said Fields.

Hafner explained, "If a Norwegian were taking out the garbage and the bottom fell out of the bag onto his good shoes, he'd say '*uff da.*' If he came home to find his wife had run off with the milkman, he'd say '*uff da.*' If he heard on the radio that an armed nuclear warhead had been accidentally launched, and would land in his back yard in thirty seconds, he'd say '*uff da.*'"

Everyone laughed, and Nygaard said, "I'd run for the hills, but you're right; I'd mutter '*uff da*' all the way. C'mon, Larry, you're falling behind! Eat, eat!"

Buying time, Fields pointed at a series of wooden roundels on the wall. "What do the words on the blue one mean?" He wished Nygaard would leave him alone; he felt one more bite would make him break out in soft, white scales. If only the man weren't so big. The worst part was that Nygaard thought he was being nice. If this was nice, God save him from whatever Nygaard considered justice—much less the vengeance he was so hopped up on.

Mrs. Draxten looked at the roundels on the wall. "*'Smuler er ogsaa brod,'*" she said, and paused to translate in her head. "That means, 'Crumbs are also bread.'"

Fields frowned at her. "Does it have some other kind of meaning?"

She turned back to him. "It means what it says, Mr. Fields."

"Well, it seems a trifle obvi—" He broke off and rolled a nervous eye at Nygaard. "I mean, that doesn't seem to be, er, very significant, considering all the work someone did to hang it up there." The lettering was fancy, and the roundel was decorated with white and yellow flowers.

She was looking puzzled at his obtuseness. "It means, when we pray for our daily bread, we should be thankful even if all we get is crumbs, Mr. Fields."

"Yeah, like I may have to settle for just punching you in the nose one time," said Nygaard, and he laughed his big laugh. Fields looked at Nygaard's hands and winced. Maybe if he stood and very quickly smashed his chair over the big cop's thick, stupid, blond head—No, that was his partner sitting right there. Cops tended to carry their guns all the time, and God knew what kind of a shot these two were. Nygaard cast a glance at him, and he took a large bite of lutefisk. Bad as it was, the rutabagas were worse.

"Ah, dessert!" said Nygaard at last, and Fields gratefully put down his fork. Even Norwegians couldn't come up with something truly awful for dessert, could they?

"Prune compote!" said the irrepressible Hafner.

"Uh—" said Fields, but Nygaard was too quick for him.

"You'll want a lot of this," said Nygaard. "Seeing how little of everything else you ate."

"No, really; just a bit!" pleaded Fields, but Nygaard loaded his plate with a second large spoonful.

Hafner began to laugh. When Nygaard turned a bewildered face to him, he laughed harder. "Too much, too much!" he choked, between spasms, tapping his enormous friend on the shoulder.

Nygaard handed him the bowl of compote and asked, "Are you all right, Jack?"

"I'm fine!" said Hafner, handing on the bowl and going into fresh peals.

"All right, pal, what's the joke?" asked Nygaard impatiently.

Surprised but still laughing, Hafner asked, "You mean you honestly don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Your punishment for your cheatin' buddy over there," said Hafner. "I never would've thought you'd come up with something as sneaky as that."

"What, sneaky?" demanded Nygaard, beginning to sound annoyed.

"Come on, you seriously think all an outsider has to do is taste lutefisk to be converted to the

Norwegian way of taste? You've been tearing down this poor geek shingle by shingle all evening! Bringing him to the dinner and filling him up with lutefisk, rutabagas, and prune compote, ha, ha, ha! Mean and legal and doesn't leave a mark, just like you wanted!" He saw the honest bewilderment on his partner's face and laughed even harder. "Oh, God, you thought you were doing him a favor, didn't you?"

"What favor?" asked Nygaard angrily. "I made him pay for his ticket!" This set everyone at the table off.

Nygaard turned to look at Fields, and saw, for the first time, the greenish pallor and glazed eyes. "Well, double my IQ and call me a halfwit!" he said, beginning to laugh himself.

When Hafner got himself a little under control, he gasped, "And the best part is, even if he complained, the grand jury would return a no-bill. Every member would be a lutefisk eater and unable to understand what the problem was!" He leaned back and said to Fields, "What about it? Next time you come to town, we'll treat you to an even better dinner. Have

you ever tasted mutton with cabbage?"

"Or gammelost?" added Draxten.

"Gammelost," breathed Nygaard reverently. "Boy, I wish we had some gammelost."

Hafner said to Fields, "Gammelost means cottage cheese, old, old, old cottage cheese. You keep it in a jar until it turns grey, and serve it up on bread and butter."

"It's wonderful," said Nygaard, who didn't disagree with Hafner's recipe for this treat, either. He caught the look on Fields's face and grinned. In a mock Norwegian accent he said, "Py Gott, Larry!" He nudged him, nearly knocking him off his chair. "Ve giff you some gammelost next time we see you, yah, shure!"

But in his eye was the savage anticipatory glint of a Viking whose hospitality had been insulted, and Fields, who had been savoring thoughts of a vengeful return match sometime down the road, decided maybe he'd give Minnesota a complete miss next time. He looked down at the remains of his prune compote, nestled against a lump of lutefisk. "Uff da," he said sadly.



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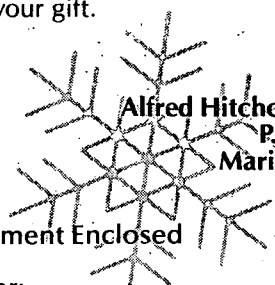


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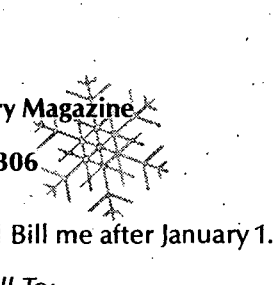
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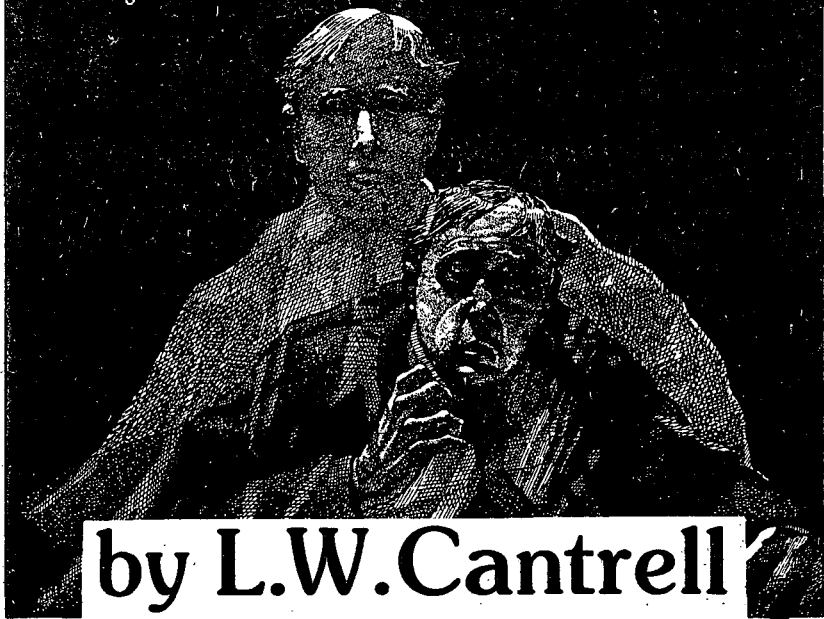
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FICTION

The Wish Peddler



by L.W. Cantrell

The path through Graham Park was lined with aged oak trees that had, over the years, grown to need each other. Their gnarled old branches held hands overhead, and one passing underneath and looking upward could not be sure which arthritic limb belonged to which distended trunk. Despite their antiquity, new foliage was busy emerging, for it was spring and though the trees were old they were not yet too tired to try.

A slippery breeze cavorted between spatters of moonbeams and did surface dives through the balmy air. There was the scent of

Illustration by Janet Aulisio

greenness, of the ripening year, of things new and renewed. The evening wrapped itself languidly on the park and sidled down the path and around the trees. It was a velvet night, a honeyed night, the perfect accompaniment—complete with cricket murmurings and silvered moonlight—to the moment when one Randall P. Wodenhaus became dead.

Not that Mr. Wodenhaus immediately recognized this august happening for what it was (he had declined setting the precise time and place of his demise himself, opting for the added enjoyment of spontaneity). Rather the reverse, in fact, for several moments had passed before the first inkling of what was transpiring tickled the edges of Mr. Wodenhaus's reverie. By then it was much too late to change his mind (had he wished to), and the faint stirring of rebellion that was his initial response fizzled out. An Epilogue was, after all, an Epilogue and should be greeted as such with dignity and a certain amount of *savoir-faire*—if, that is, one was getting what one asked for; and that was exactly what Mr. Wodenhaus was getting, for he had bought and paid for twenty-four hours of death.

Mr. Wodenhaus glanced at his wristwatch. Eight P.M. on the dot.

It was mildly interesting to note, thought Mr. Wodenhaus, that so far none of the venerable prophecies had come to pass. Mr. Wodenhaus was unsure whether or not to be disappointed (some forecasts *were* a bit intense for his taste), and decided to reserve judgment. He had harbored no fear of suddenly finding himself flung into a fiery furnace, as it were (though it didn't hurt to have this belief confirmed); nor had he expected to be greeted by a heavenly host of angels gloriously in chorus. Mr. Wodenhaus had never suffered from the religious illusions or cultist superstitions that plagued so many.

Yet death had always held a strange fascination for him, particularly as the years advanced and its dark spectre loomed more and more ominously on Mr. Wodenhaus's horizon. Perhaps its status as the sole inevitability of life (taxes could be gotten around) caused the question of what death would be like to gnaw with increasing voracity at Mr. Wodenhaus's patience until at last he decided to jump the gun a mite (no pun intended). It was important, thought Mr. Wodenhaus, to be prepared. Mr. Wodenhaus had always liked to know beforehand just what he was getting into and didn't mind paying for the knowledge. His contract with the Wish Peddler had cost him more than he'd wanted to pay, but once a

rider had been attached assuring that no physical harm would come to him during the twenty-four hour period and guaranteeing his safe return at the end of that time, Mr. Wodenhaus had been quite satisfied.

Drat! He'd forgotten to pay special attention to the initial *feel* of being dead. Then he realized it was not too late, for looking over his shoulder he discovered his body was still in the process of settling to the ground. It was as though "he" had simply walked on while "his body" had stopped its forward movement and slowly begun to crumple.

Freedom was the word that popped up first regarding his temporary state, yet that single word fell just short of perfect. Mr. Wodenhaus searched for an appropriate analogy and conjured up a somewhat too vivid picture of a snake slithering out of its skin—then discarded it for the more pleasant image of a butterfly, flitting with capricious abandon from its cocoon. Ah, yes. A butterfly. That was much more to his taste. A yellow butterfly.

Mr. Wodenhaus continued to regard his body, which was still involved in its slow-motion slump. It lent a certain graceful symmetry to his angular frame. Mr. Wodenhaus smiled, seeing himself through new eyes and liking what he saw. Death wasn't so bad. It smoothed the creases, rounded the edges, eased the pace—

For just a moment, something scratched at a door in the back of his mind, something cold and ghoulish. Mr. Wodenhaus tightened his lips and bolted the door firmly shut.

Mr. Wodenhaus looked around at the world he would inhabit for the next twenty-four hours. Right off, he could detect no major changes. The trees were still trees, their budding branches at rest now in the absence of the earlier breeze. The path continued on its winding way through the park. The crickets—wait a minute, what had happened to the crickets? Only moments before, the night air had been filled with their raspy songs. In fact, their chirring was not the only sound Mr. Wodenhaus now realized was missing. He no longer heard the muted rumble of the evening traffic over on Fifty-fourth Street . . . nor the soft strands of guitar music coming from the young man seated on a bench farther back along the path . . . nor the occasional twitter of an awakened bird . . . nor a dog barking . . . nor . . . big deal. Noise could be so distracting to one's peace of mind—yes! yes, of course—that was it! Peace. Quiet. That was part of death, wasn't it? "The Silence of the Grave" and all that rot (uh, no pun intended). Something to enjoy. For twenty-four hours.

Mr. Wodenhaus glanced over his shoulder once more, only to be a bit disconcerted now by the sight. His body seemed suspended . . . immobile . . . one knee slightly bent; the foot turned sideways and pointed inward . . . an arm just beginning to act upon orders from the brain to prepare for an impending fall . . . head tilted back, eyes staring . . . staring . . . dead eyes . . . dead, dead eyes . . .

Should be closed, thought Mr. Wodenhaus, repressing an involuntary shudder, zeroing in on a point he could deal with and, for the moment at least, disavowing knowledge of the cold thing tapping on the door in the back of his mind.

Resolutely Mr. Wodenhaus approached the body, intent only on closing the gaping, sightless eyes. He pressed thumb and forefinger to the lids—and immediately recoiled. There was no sense of touch. He put his hand out toward, then *through* his body.

Mr. Wodenhaus walked through his body.

He did it again.

He went over to a tree and mimicked the act.

He waved his arm through a bush.

He scooped his hand through the ground.

But Mr. Wodenhaus could not close his body's eyes; and for some reason, at the moment, this was the *only* thing Mr. Wodenhaus really wanted to do.

Mr. Wodenhaus shrugged. Apparently certain norms were in effect here, just as in the real world. There were a million things one could do, and a million things one couldn't. Just different things. Adjustments could be made and Mr. Wodenhaus would make them. After all . . . it was only for twenty-four hours.

The best thing to do, decided Mr. Wodenhaus, was to branch out a bit and see what other new accomplishments he had acquired. This was going to be fun. Mr. Wodenhaus chuckled merrily. It was like being invisible. Who hadn't pondered the possibilities of such a state? He headed toward Fifty-fourth Street. First a little snack, then—wait a minute . . . he couldn't eat!

Never mind, never mind. He didn't need to eat. He was dead—temporarily dead; he amended—and there were infinite . . . uh, *lots* of other things to do. Mr. Wodenhaus's agile mind flicked over a wide range of activities: from such trivialities as playing fiendish tricks on some of his cronies to more serious endeavors such as altering bank records and property titles. But how was he to do any of those things when his fingers wouldn't hold a pen? . . . when his hands passed through solid objects? . . . when he had no substance, no effect, no—

Stop it! This would not do. It would not do at all! There was no real problem. Maybe it wasn't turning out so well after all, but it would soon be over. Nothing could go wrong, the Wish Peddler had assured him of that; and besides, it was all neatly spelled out in his contract. Mr. Wodenhaus patted his pocket. Right there in the fine print just above the line where he'd signed his name (in blood, of all things, but the Wish Peddler had been a stickler on this point, no pun intended). Mr. Wodenhaus always read fine print, *particularly* read fine print, so he knew that in exactly the specified time his contract would become null and void—without exception!

Mr. Wodenhaus was ashamed of himself. His twenty-four hours was just beginning and here he was already allowing emotionalism to replace logic. He'd never done so in life, why should he in death? *Temporary* death, he quickly amended. He must simply get his thoughts in order, adjust his thinking. Mr. Wodenhaus resumed walking. So what if taste and sound and touch were denied him during his tenure here. He could see, couldn't he? And there was so much to see.

Off! Mr. Wodenhaus staggered backward. He'd walked into something solid. He didn't see anything—Mr. Wodenhaus put out a tentative hand—but there was something in his way. He moved his hand up and down, left and right. There was an invisible barrier of some sort. Mr. Wodenhaus drew back his hand. He glanced around him, looked above him, suddenly recalling one of those "venerable prophecies"—something about restless spirits doomed to spend eternity within the spatial limits of their earthly passing. Could this barrier possibly extend—

Something cold started pounding on the back door in Mr. Wodenhaus's mind. It was the ghoul. It wanted out. It had something to tell him.

No no, not now, thank you. Not now. Don't want to know now, thank you very much. Not now . . .

Mr. Wodenhaus moved back from the barrier. He didn't look at his body again. He sat down on the ground instead, his back toward it. He couldn't feel the ground, but that didn't matter. He had to make plans. There were other things he could do, he was sure of it. Mr. Wodenhaus glanced at his wristwatch. Eight P.M. on the dot. He must not waste any of his precious time. After all, he only had twenty-four hours. . . .

The story that follows is the second in our mini-series of tales from AHMM that were adapted by Alfred Hitchcock for his television series. It was aired on March 1, 1965, on The Alfred Hitchcock Hour under the title "Wally the Beard," having first been published in AHMM in the January, 1965, issue.—ED.

FICTION

The Chinless Wonder

by Stanley Abbott

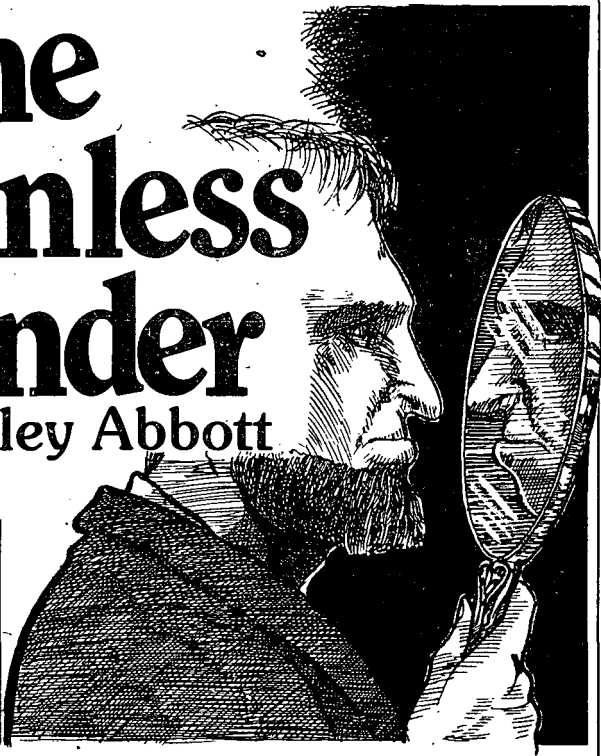


Illustration by Jim Ceribello

Walter Mills was twenty-five and fed up, "browed off" as he put it, with life and with himself. Since he was seventeen, he had worked in a solicitor's office near Piccadilly,

slowly working himself up from the high stool of a junior clerk to the desk of a bookkeeper.

For eight years he had carried out his routine work without complaint, but under the surface he burned with a sense

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of injustice. Rich clients left behind the tantalizing whiff of a rich cigar or an elegant perfume, and in his imagination they lived romantic and adventurous lives. He envied them, for he had never had a girl. He was convinced the secret was money. So for a couple of years he had been quietly embezzling small sums in such a way that it was impossible to detect.

One day he left the office at lunchtime to buy a suit. It was really the suit that started it all, a smart Glen Urquhart check. If the salesman hadn't been so insistent, Walter Mills wouldn't even have thought of trying it on; he had never worn anything but hard-wearing greys and blacks. But when he saw himself in the three-way mirror, he was amazed at the difference it made. He hesitated when the salesman produced a smooth, olive green hat with a smartly shaped brim to go with it—he never wore a hat. He turned to look at himself and caught sight of his face in the side mirror. He looked away quickly, but the sharp-eyed salesman had noticed.

"Why, that suit makes a new man of you, sir," he exclaimed with calculated amazement. Walter Mills had taken the lot. Self-satisfied, he didn't go back to the office.

But when he put the checked suit on in his garret room, high among the roofs overlooking the River Thames, and looked at himself in the cracked wardrobe mirror, his doubts returned. Timidity stared back at him with pale blue eyes. It was his chin, or rather the lack of it, that was the trouble; it just faded into his neck. He looked, as a callous army sergeant had once said, like "a chinless wonder that couldn't pull the skin off a rice pudding." The checked suit couldn't conceal that, and he began to regret buying it. He couldn't wear it to a job, and he didn't go anywhere.

With only books for company, Walter spent each night in his room in the roof, lonely, bitter, and seething with dreams of the lovely women he saw in magazines or the pin-ups on his walls. He longed for something more than mere existence; but he had no friends. He knew his looks didn't give him a chance. At one time he had tried to grow a beard, but it had been a straggly failure. Thinking of it as he studied himself in his smart new suit and hat, he wondered if he couldn't get a beard such as actors wore.

He remembered there was a famous theatrical costumiers on Wardour Street. He said he was an actor, and whether they

believed him or not, a beard was produced to match his coloring. He was shown how it attached with a self-adhesive; it could be put on or taken off at any time quite easily. When it had been trimmed short and given a smart naval cut, the effect when he looked in the mirror was almost unbelievable; the weak, timid looking Walter Mills had disappeared.

As he walked down Piccadilly he imagined everybody was looking at him. But when he realized that no one was the slightest bit interested, he stared fascinated at his reflection in the shop windows. The set of his shoulders altered and he held his head higher. He decided to walk home along the Embankment beside the river. When he came to the Black Swan, a pub on the corner of Corson Street where he lived and which he'd never entered before, he went in without hesitation and ordered a drink.

It was pleasant sitting up at the bar with a bright fire in the grate. Through the window he could see the clock tower of Big Ben just lit up across the river. The barmaid came and leant her elbows on the counter in front of him. He'd heard people calling her Mabel. She was a country looking girl with a high color and fine brown eyes.

"Are you off a ship?" she asked softly.

"No, I live up the street here."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she smiled.

"I hadn't seen you here before; I took you for a naval man."

He was delighted at this. "You're not far wrong," he lied. "I was in the merchant navy, but I've just moved here."

"That's the life for a man," she said admiringly.

After he'd had another drink, Walter found himself shooting a line about the roaring forties and the head waters of the Amazon. It all came from books, for Walter Mills never had been any farther than the Tower of London on a pleasure boat.

A couple at the bar joined in, and for more than an hour he kept them entertained. The girl wasn't a patch on his pin-ups, and he guessed she was older than he was, but she had a nice complexion and soft dark hair.

"You made a hit with Noreen," Mabel said when they had left.

"Was that her husband?" he asked.

Mabel gave a short laugh. "Curly? No, but he'd like to be. Noreen's one of the lucky ones. Doesn't have to work; she's got money, enough not to worry about it."

As he walked up the street to his lodgings, he laughed to him-

self. How easily people were taken in. He was thinking of Noreen and wondering what her last name was when it occurred to him that it would be a good idea if he had a new name. Walter Mills was too ordinary. He would like to be Captain somebody, but perhaps that was too risky. What about Marshall? That had something—Phillip Marshall.

Walter was mounting the steps to the front door when he saw his landlady coming up the area steps from the basement. It was dark and in the street light Mrs. Jones was looking at him suspiciously. In his new get-up he was obviously a stranger to her.

"Wot d'you want?" she called.

"I'm a friend of Mr. Mills," he replied in a tone lower than his usual one. "Is he in, do you know?"

"'E's never out so 'e must be in. Wot's your name?"

It was ready on the tip of his tongue. "Marshall," he replied.

"Well, 'e's under the roof if you want to go up," and with a sniff she turned away.

Up in his garret he smiled to himself as he took off the beard and rubbed his face. If he could fool Mrs. Jones, he could fool anybody. She wasn't easily deceived.

To be a gentleman of leisure, to get up when he liked and do

what he liked, was a new sensation for Walter Mills. With five hundred embezzled pounds in his savings account, he had no intention of getting a job till he had to. And if he had anything to do with it, he decided, he'd never have to. He had often dreamed of marrying a rich woman and lying around all day. Other people managed it. Why shouldn't he? And if he couldn't cut out Curly, there were plenty of fish in the sea besides Noreen.

But he found to his surprise that Mabel was right. Noreen Harper had fallen for him. Though he had to admit she wasn't much compared to his dream girls, he could hardly credit his luck that he even had a girl, never mind one with a nice income and a smart looking sports car.

He was soon taking her about to restaurants and fancy places in the West End that he wouldn't have thought of going into before. Once when they were having a drink in the Black Swan, Curly came over and sat with them. Walter didn't like the sharp way he dressed or the cold, hard-eyed look Curly gave him, and he was pleased when Noreen gave him the hint to push off.

Only one problem troubled him, his landlady. Whenever he went out dressed as Phillip

Marshall, Walter had to creep down the stairs and slip out when he was certain Mrs. Jones was busy in the basement kitchen. Once he'd met her on the stairs and had hurried past, saying he had been up to see Mr. Mills. He knew if she got wind of what he was doing, it would be all over the neighborhood. They would hear of it at the Black Swan, and that would put paid to his romance with Noreen. He didn't dare risk that. He decided to move at night, when no one was about.

Walter found a room in a house on Maybury Street, which is two over from Corson Street, as he wanted to stay in the neighborhood. He moved in as Phillip Marshall.

Because he liked rowing on the river, and also to impress Noreen, Walter bought a sailing dinghy at a boat club below the Embankment. It was second-hand and only cost twenty pounds. The boatman was giving him sailing lessons. It needed sanding down and varnishing.

One morning he was working on the boat when the tool slipped and cut his arm. Blood spurted over a canvas and the floorboards before he could stop it, but he managed to bind the cut with his handkerchief and ran up the steps to the Black Swan.

Noreen had just driven up

and was going in. When she saw him she cried, "Oh, Phil, you poor thing; that needs bandaging properly. Here, jump in and I'll take you up to my place."

While Noreen was bandaging his arm, her perfume, warm and inviting, surrounded him. Without realizing what he was doing, he bent down to kiss the nape of her neck beneath the soft dark curls. She turned her head at that moment and he found his lips on hers. The sensation overwhelmed him. He'd never kissed a girl before, but he soon found that didn't matter.

It was late in the afternoon when he returned to the boat yard, elated and feeling very pleased with himself. There was still enough light, and as he wanted to get the boat in the water for the weekend, he went on working, thinking at the same time of Noreen. He'd wait a few days before asking her to marry him, he decided. After that he'd be on easy street. When he got fed up with her, as he already knew he would, he'd just have to get rid of her. There was always a way. Then he'd have lots of money and could look for one of his dream girls.

His thoughts were running riot when he heard footsteps coming down the wooden stairs

to the yard. It was nearly dark but he could make out the thick-set figure of Curly as he came towards him.

"Doing all right, ain't you, Phil?"

"Just finished," he replied, looking down at the boat as he wiped his hands. "Put her in the water tomorrow."

Curly's large, hard hand shot out and caught him by the front of his shirt. "I'm not talking about boats, stupid. I'm talking about Noreen; doing all right, ain't yer, Phil?"

Curly's leering face was close to his and reeking of liquor.

Walter stammered, "I don't know what . . ."

Curly reached up with his other hand and took hold of his beard. "How about it, Wally? Like me to rip this off and take you up to the Black Swan?"

Walter struggled to get out of Curly's grip and tried to throw a foot to trip him, but Curly gave him a shake that rattled his teeth and nearly tore the beard off.

"Try that again," Curly growled, "and I'll stretch you. Wally Mills, the chinless wonder of Corson Street—who'd have thought it?" and he gave a low laugh. "Didn't know I was on to you, did you, Wally? But I won't let on because you and me's going to do a deal, see.

Now listen: I got a load of stuff I don't want round my place for the next two months or so. It's hot, see, and you're going to help me drop it in the river. You've got concrete mooring blocks with ropes and a float-can with a mooring ring on top, ain't you?"

Wally nodded and Curly let go of him and took out a pack of cigarettes. When they had lit up, Wally asked, "Is—is there much of this stuff?"

Curly looked at him. "One sack—and it's heavy."

Wally had read of big robberies and saw a sack full of gold and silver candlesticks and plate. "I mean—what sort of stuff is it?"

"The less you know the better for you. What d'you think I am—stupid? It's all wrapped up good and solid, so the water won't get at it. My car's backed up to the top of the steps, so let's go."

Wally hesitated and Curly came close to him.

"Would you like to go up to the Swan and have me rip that beard off in front of 'em all?"

Wally had been thinking about it and wondering if it wouldn't be better just to take it off and be clear of the whole business. Life had been much simpler when he had been sitting on a high stool. But then

he thought of how little money he had left, and of Noreen and how close he was to it. He knew Curly wouldn't let on to anyone now he had something on him.

When the job was done, and Curly had helped him pull the boat up into the yard, they went up the stairs together.

"Don't go getting any ideas about that stuff, Wally," Curly said. "Two months from now, when everything's nice and quiet again, you and me's going to haul it up, and if it's been touched you'll finish up down there in place of it."

Under the street lamp in front of the Black Swan, Curly stopped and looked at him. "Who'd have thought it? Wally the Beard," he said, and gave him a playful jab to the mid-section that nearly doubled him up. Laughing, he vanished into the night.

It was a long time before Phillip Marshall could get to sleep that night and he woke late, feeling tired and irritable. He decided he'd walk round to Noreen's and take her out to lunch somewhere. After he'd dressed in his smart clothes and put on his beard he felt better. He was coming down the front steps when he saw Mrs. Jones, his sharp-eyed old landlady from Corson Street. He was hoping she wouldn't recognize him and

pretended not to see her, but she came right up to him.

"Aren't you Mr. Marshall, Walter Mills's friend? You visited him."

He muttered something about having to catch a bus and hurried on, but not before Mrs. Jones had noticed he was wearing a belted raincoat belonging to Walter Mills. She was sure of it because she'd repaired the belt herself.

Wise in the way of lodgers, she wondered if perhaps Walter Mills was sharing a room here with Mr. Marshall, and if this wasn't a good opportunity to get the rent that was owing to her when he left so suddenly. She rang the bell and spoke to Phillip Marshall's landlady, and in no time the two of them were up in Phillip Marshall's room indulging the favorite pastime of London landladies. Mrs. Jones immediately recognized all Walter Mills's things.

"And look at this!" she cried when they turned up a savings bank book showing he had had five hundred pounds but had drawn most of it out in the last few weeks.

When they found a canvas holdall with reddish brown stains on it, that was enough for Mrs. Jones; she didn't read the *Police Court Gazette* for nothing; in her vocabulary,

stains went with only one other word—blood. She went to the police.

When he got back to his lodgings late in the afternoon, Phillip Marshall's landlady met him in the hall with the news that a couple of plainclothesmen were waiting up in his room. "And I'll trouble you to pack and get out. I keep a respectable house," she told him.

Well, this is it, he thought. He wondered what the sentence was for embezzling funds. It had been a bad day from start to finish. Noreen hadn't been at home; the place had seemed deserted. And when he had asked Mabel at the Black Swan if she'd been in, Mabel told him Noreen had sent a message by Curly that she'd had to go to Brighton for a few days to look after a sister who was sick.

But why Curly? That's what he couldn't understand. Mabel said he'd come in with the message about ten thirty the night before, just about two hours after he had left Curly in the street.

Wally wondered if he should just walk out the door and away from it all, when a voice called down the stairwell.

"Mr. Marshall, will you come up here, please?"

The man introduced himself. "I'm Inspector Marples and this

is my assistant, Detective Sergeant Atkins."

While the inspector told him they were looking into the disappearance of Walter Mills, and would like to know why he had Walter Mills's things, Phillip Marshall could hardly keep from laughing. In fact, it was such a relief that he felt slightly hysterical.

"That's easily explained," he said. "Wally went up north to get a job when he left Mrs. Jones's. He asked me to look after his stuff. Said he'd let me know when he got settled, and I could send it on to him."

After more questions, the inspector produced the canvas holdall. "And perhaps you could explain these stains, Mr. Marshall?"

"That's blood. I cut myself—see," and he rolled up a sleeve to show them.

"You are telling us this is your blood on Walter Mills's bag, Mr. Marshall?" the inspector asked quietly.

"That's right. I cut myself working on my boat and it got on the bag," he said brightly.

"So, you have a boat," he said softly.

"Yes, it's at Bunton's yard, just at the bottom of the street."

The inspector and the sergeant exchanged looks.

"I think we had better see

this boat," the inspector said.

Down in the yard they stood around looking at Phillip Marshall's boat while he lit a cigarette and thought what clunks these coppers are.

"It's just been painted and varnished, sir," said the sergeant.

"It may seem strange, but I had noticed that, sergeant."

Sergeant Atkins was bent over, pulling at something. He straightened up with a section of the floorboards in his hand.

"Look at this, sir," he pointed to some stains faintly visible on the surface of the wood.

"I was wondering about that, sergeant," said the inspector, "but you failed to notice something very interesting; the wood is unvarnished."

"You don't varnish floorboards," Phillip said.

"I'm not interested in that," the inspector said sharply. "Can you explain these stains?"

"Blood," Phillip said impatiently. "I told you I cut myself and it went on the bag and the boards."

"This wood shows evidence of a determined attempt to get rid of the stains; it's been scoured, I should say . . ."

"With bleach," Phillip cut in.

"Why did you want to get rid of the stains, Mr. Marshall?" the inspector asked quietly.

Phillip gave a laugh. "Why? Because I didn't want blood all over the boat."

Inspector Marples stared out over the depressingly misty vista of the Thames. He could see signs of any sort of a case slipping away and was turning to go when he asked casually, "Do you always keep your boat up here?"

"Yes, but I've got moorings now and I'll . . ." Phillip's voice trailed off as he realized where it was leading. But Inspector Marples was leaning forward like a long thin bird.

"You were saying, Mr. Marshall, that you have moorings." He looked over the river at the boats tied up and then at the two float cans some distance out. "Would those be they, Mr. Marshall?" he asked, pointing.

"Yes, but as I said, I haven't used them yet."

The inspector gave a shrug as though it were of no importance. But as he turned to Sergeant Atkins, Walter had a feeling he was back on the scent.

"We'll take the floorboard and the bag, sergeant, and get the lab to run an analysis on them. Keep yourself available. Mr. Marshall. We'll be back here in the morning."

As he walked home, Phillip's first inclination was to take off.

But they would soon catch up with him, he decided, and then it would be worse. Also, there was a chance that Inspector Marples might give up on the case, and then he wouldn't have to disclose that he was Walter Mills. If the worse came to the worst and he had to tell them who he was, then he'd have to pick the moment before things went too far and they found out about Curly's load at the bottom of the river. If there was one thing that scared him even more than Noreen and everyone at the Black Swan finding out about him, it was what Curly would do if the coppers dragged up that sack full of stuff.

Walter was in the boat yard early next morning and hung around for more than an hour waiting for the sound of footsteps on the wooden stairs leading down from the Embankment, when a river police launch roared in towards the wooden jetty. Inspector Marples and Sergeant Atkins jumped down and the launch turned away upriver.

"I think we'd better find somewhere to talk, Mr. Marshall," the inspector said. So he led the way to the boathouse, and after he'd shut the door and sat down, the inspector came straight to the point.

"Our lab report shows that the bloodstains on the canvas holdall and the floorboard check out the same as those on the army records of Walter Mills. That was a deliberate attempt on your part, Mr. Marshall, to mislead the police. And your story about being in the merchant navy has checked out as equally false."

This is it, Phillip thought, as the inspector paused to light a cigarette. There's no way out of it. I'll have to tell them.

"You can make it easier for yourself and for us, but especially for yourself, if you're frank and tell us the truth," the inspector said, giving him a thin smile. "Maybe it was an accident that killed Walter Mills and you're afraid to say so. If you're not frank with us, Mr. Marshall, I must warn you I shall apply for a warrant for your arrest on the evidence available and charge you with the murder of Walter Mills."

Thoroughly satisfied with himself, the inspector sat back. In his experience, if there was anything that scared a man into talking it was the threat of arrest.

Sighing audibly, Phillip reached up and slowly peeled the beard from his face. "I am Walter Mills," he said quietly.

A profound silence settled on

the boathouse. It didn't last long. Inspector Marples seemed to explode upwards, and for nearly ten minutes remained almost completely incoherent at the thought that he was arresting a man for murdering himself.

When the inspector had calmed down sufficiently, Walter Mills told them why he had done it. He spoke eloquently of his love for Noreen Harper, and he appealed to the inspector's better nature not to let his little masquerade become generally known, as this would most surely result in the loss of his fiancée. Walter Mills was smiling to himself as he laid it on as thick as he could.

But Inspector Marples had no better nature left; a beautiful case had dissolved from under his very nose. Jumping to his feet, he shouted, "This is the most outrageous example of a public mischief I have ever encountered. And if you think you're just going to walk out of here free, you're greatly mistaken," he roared. "I'm going to charge you with a public mischief, impersonation, and anything and everything I can think of." He dropped back in his chair, breathless, and stared unbelievably at the unhappy, chinless face in front of him. "Get out," he shouted suddenly,

"get out or I'll kill you with my bare hands."

Walter Mills got to his feet hesitatingly. He had turned towards the door when it burst open as one of the flat-hatted river police charged in.

"We've got the body, sir," he shouted excitedly.

Inspector Marples got slowly to his feet. *I must keep calm*, he told himself. *At all costs, I must keep calm.*

"Sergeant," he said wearily, "this is Walter Mills. Take whatever you've got and be-gone."

"I didn't say it was the body of Walter Mills, sir. It's..." Before he could say any more he was knocked to one side as two more flat-hats pushed in, carrying between them a dripping sack. They dropped it with a thud that shook the boat-house.

"Harper's the name, sir," one of the flat-hats said, handing Inspector Marples a sodden leather wallet. "It was sunk with the mooring blocks, just as you said, sir."

The inspector stared at him in amazement, then at the wallet. "Harper?" he echoed, looking at Walter Mills, who had shrunk back against a wall.

Slowly a little smile dawned on Inspector Marples' long thin face. "Weren't you just telling

us of your great love for Noreen Harper?"

But Walter Mills's eyes were fixed in horror on two of the sergeants who were tugging at one end of the sack. It came away slowly, letting the body flop to the floor. He forced himself to look at it. It didn't look like Noreen. Dank black hair lay plastered across the forehead of a sallow face. Then he saw that the body was dressed in a man's suit.

"Noreen Harper's husband, eh?" said Inspector Marples. "I might have guessed it."

"I—I didn't know there was a husband," Walter Mills stammered.

"Isn't that what they always say, sergeant?" Inspector Marples said to his assistant.

"Always, sir. Never fails."

Walter Mills was staring at the dead man and thinking of Noreen. Curly and Noreen, probably at the other side of the world by now, not that it mattered. Nothing mattered now.

"I never knew him," he said in a tired voice.

"Save it," Inspector Marples cut in. "Save it for the Old Bailey."

But Walter Mills didn't hear him, for there was a singing in his ears as he stood with the smartly cut beard clutched tightly in his hand.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



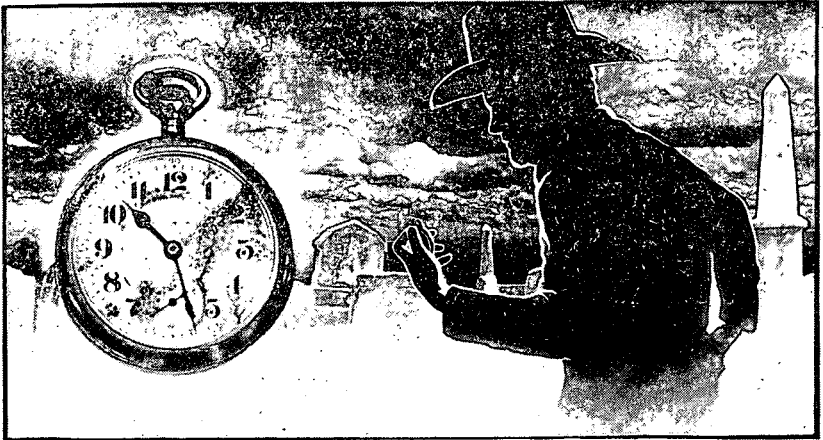
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Maybe if he took three giant steps . . . ? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story in 250 words or less, based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

Sheriff Bigelow and the Nickel-Plated Pocket Watch

by G.S. Hargrave



“**T**his,” Deputy Walts was saying, “is definitely very weird.” He chewed at the bottom of his full black mustache in growing perplexity. “On a scale of one to ten, I’d have to call it a definite ten.”

The whole strange business started on a Tuesday morning,

Illustration by J. K. Potter.

late last October. Walts and I were standing in the middle of Oak Knoll cemetery—one of those long-forgotten graveyards hidden among the stubbled fields of Constantine County—with our collars turned up against the morning chill. Around us there was an acre or so of headstones. Around that,

there was a rusting iron fence. Beyond the fence, there was a field of withered cornstalks, a stand of oaks, and a thicket of bramble that a rabbit couldn't get through.

The earliest arrival at Oak Knoll Cemetery had moldered in the ground for a good hundred and fifty years, disturbed only at monthly intervals by the brief intrusions of a county mowing crew. It would have seemed like a quiet enough place to wait out an eternity.

Until last night, that is.

What we'd found upon our arrival was half a dozen rudely opened graves, and a thoroughly morbid array of scattered bones, decaying bits of cloth, and pieces of crumbling wooden caskets, all mixed in among the first heavy fall of autumn leaves.

It was weird, all right.

"Better get us some pictures," I said to Walts.

Walts started off down the hill toward where our car was parked. Meanwhile, George Mackey—the county caretaker—limped purposefully in my direction. I prepared myself. I know trouble when I see it coming.

"Jeez, Sheriff Bigelow—just look at this! We ain' *never* gonna get 'em all sorted out!"

Not this side of the Second Coming, I thought.

Old George is more than a touch hard of hearing, and tends to shout straight in your face to make up for it. His normal conversational tone was something I could probably learn to live with. His breath, however, was another matter.

I pulled my handkerchief from my pocket and made a show of polishing the lenses of my specs, giving me a momentary excuse to tilt my nose from his line of fire. "Just do the best you can, George. Don't worry—no one will ever know the difference."

"Hell," he snapped, "you think *they* won't know?" He glared at me for a moment in pop-eyed outrage, then pointedly turned his back. Mumbling to himself, he started off down the hill, his grayed head bobbing with each step. He angrily motioned for his crew to pick up their shovels.

This was going to be some morning.

Walts had come back and was clumsily focusing the Polaroid on a stray femur that lay at his feet. There was a flash and whirl. He stood watching the results develop, eyeing the emerging image critically.

"It's not for the family album, Walts. Just get on with it, okay?"

Walts got on with it.

Down the hillside, Mackey's helpers were busily tossing bones and leaves into the clos-

est open grave. George howled in fury, demanding a more even distribution of the departed.

After twenty minutes or so, Walts had finished up and was putting the camera back into its case. He glanced up at me. "It was vandals—right?"

I shook my head. "Too much time and energy involved. Vandals might tip over a few headstones, or empty a couple of cans of spray paint. But *this*? Hell—it would have taken a couple of grown men the whole damn night."

"But if it wasn't vandalism, what *was* it?" Walts' voice carried a vaguely worried note. He sounded like a man who's watched too many of those late-night creature-features, and is beginning to entertain some strange ideas.

"Graverobbers?" I shouted. "Satanists? An escaped band of lunatic genealogists? Now how the hell should I know?"

Things were bad enough without bringing Boris Karloff into the picture.

Walts blinked, shying away from this unexpected verbal onslaught like a scolded puppy. All six foot four and two hundred ten pounds of him.

I'm already an old man, and sometimes I fear I'm becoming a crotchety one as well. Or maybe I just need my bran flakes in the morning.

I sighed, motioning toward

the squad car. "Let's get back to Mecklin. We're not going to accomplish anything just standing around here with our hands in our pockets."

Walts pulled his hands out of his pockets, looking even more miserable than before.

Ten minutes later we were on our way down the curving two-lane toward town. Deputy Walts was no longer talking to me.

At least that gave me some time to think.

The whole thing had me baffled. Walts and I had combed the cemetery thoroughly, failing to turn up so much as a stray footprint or a discarded cigarette butt. Of course old George had trampled all over the place in a frenzy before. Walts and I even got there, doing an admirable job of obliterating any evidence that might otherwise have been found. Hell, I thought. He couldn't have done more damage if he'd tried.

One thing *did* seem clear, at least: Whoever had been out there had had something pretty definite in mind.

Every grave that had been opened had belonged to a male, and each and every one had died in November, 1939.

Deputy Walts has never been the sort to hold a grudge for long. By Wednesday morning,

things between us were pretty much back to normal. Ol' Walts was as talkative as ever.

We were having breakfast at the Waffle House. I was trying to read the morning edition of the *Mecklin Gazette*, while Walts expounded his various theories concerning the trouble over at Oak Knoll Cemetery. All between mouthfuls of pancake and sausage.

I briefly entertained the thought that I'd have to offend him again if I ever hoped to get any peace and quiet. Millie Preston came over to freshen my coffee, drawing an admiring glance from Walts and providing for a short break in what was very much a one-sided conversation. As the back of her ruffled skirt retreated, Walts picked right up where he'd left off.

"So anyway, the old guy dies, and gets buried. Then a couple of days later the son finds out that the lottery ticket the old man bought is a big winner. So he and his wife tear the cottage apart but they just can't find it anywhere, and suddenly the son realizes that it was in the pocket of the sweater that the old man was buried in. So late that night he takes a shovel and a lantern and heads over to the cemetery. But when he pries the lid off the casket . . ."

I looked up from the paper, catching just the last part of

what he was saying. "Who? What casket are you talking about?"

Walts looked at me, his fork poised beneath his mustache. "The one on the late show last night."

I raised my eyebrows, and pointedly turned my attention back to the newspaper.

The story was on page four, right between a piece on an infestation of giant African garden snails somewhere down in Florida and the long-range weather forecast. They never got around to saying just how big a giant African garden snail actually is, but they somehow managed to convey the impression of hordes of softball-sized creatures crisscrossing lawns and driveways on trails of glistening slime. It made for entertaining reading but wasn't exactly my idea of concise, accurate journalism.

The story on the vandalized graves was another matter. It had been written by Carmen Willowby and was little more than a succinct presentation of what few facts there were. I knew Carmen had written it because she had called me at my office to ask if I had noticed the business about the dates on the headstones.

Carmen Willowby is new in town and, so far as I'm concerned, a welcome addition to our little Missouri community.

I imagine a number of local young men must feel the same way, though for an entirely different set of reasons.

Carmen is in her middle twenties—a condition that I can scarcely recall—and is slim and energetic, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a quick and friendly smile.

Walt has certainly noticed her. The first time he saw her he moped around the office for a week, looking like something somebody had let the air out of. He hasn't been the same since. If you want my theory, Carmen is so bright and goodlooking that poor old Walt has been afraid to say word one.

In addition to all those other admirable attributes, Carmen Willowby is also tactful: No mention was made of either names or dates in her article, sparing one tired old county sheriff Lord only knows how many angry calls from outraged next-of-kin.

Believe me, folks, my gratitude knew no bounds.

I folded the paper, deciding that the whole thing would blow over inside a week.

Which serves to prove another theory of mine: Getting older doesn't necessarily mean getting smarter.

It was three thirty Thursday morning when my phone started

ringing. I was not at all pleased.

It was my old buddy, George Mackey.

"They been at it again, sheriff! This time up at Willow Creek!"

"Huh?" My brain was still fuddled with sleep. "Who's been at what?" I glanced at the glowing dial of my bedside clock radio. "My God, George, do you know what time it is? Go to bed. Call me in the morning."

Don't ask me why I still bother with that line. For twenty-five years, it's never worked.

"The body snatchers, sheriff. I caught 'em desecratin' up at Willow Creek."

I was suddenly wide awake. "You *caught* somebody? George, what in thunderation is going on? Where are you?"

"I'm up in Freemont—where you'd be if you was any kinda sheriff at all—in the phone booth outside Humbolt's gas station. Hell! Right across the tracks from the Farm Co-op!"

I turned on the lamp. "Yeah, I know where you mean. Listen, George—are you in any danger?"

"Hel-l-l no! They got clean away!"

Thank God for small favors.

"So what happened?" I was sitting on the edge of my bed, pulling my trousers on over my pajamas.

"I don't like people messin'

around in my cemeteries, sheriff. I don't like it *one damn bit!*"

George warmed to the subject, and I found myself listening to a lengthy dissertation on the probable habits of people who vandalized graveyards, delivered in words that might make even some of George's charges sit up and take notice. It suddenly occurred to me that old George was drunk as a skunk.

"Just tell me what happened, okay?" I managed to get that in during a momentary lull in the avalanche of abusive language. Even George couldn't tip a bottle and talk at the same time.

"After what happened over at Oak Knoll the other night, I figured I'd better make the rounds, just in case. Well, I come up on Willow Creek Road, and sure enough, I see a light out there. So I pull in the entrance and park my truck and get out. Guess they musta seen me, too, 'cause it weren't more'n a minute till an ol' pickup come flyin' outa there like a bat outa hell. The damn fool nearly run me over!"

"Did you get a look at them?"

"Nope. It was too damn dark, an' they was movin' too damn fast. But I'd sure know that truck. It was an ol' Studebaker. You don't see too many of them no more."

"Now listen to me, George,

you just stay right where you are. I'll be up there as quick as I can."

"I don't know, sheriff. S'pose they decide to come back? Maybe I better wait over at the cemetery."

"Dammit, George! That's *exactly* what I'm worried about! Just what do you think you'd do if they did? Stay put! I'll be up there in no time."

George belched, mumbled something noncommittal, and hung up on me.

I dialed Deputy Walts. "Walts? This is Bigelow."

"Huh?"

"Get yourself dressed, Walts. We've got trouble up at Willow Creek Cemetery. I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

We rolled into Freemont half an hour later, to find George Mackey sitting in his pickup next to the phone booth. He'd been comforting himself with a pint flask of Wild Turkey. It had had the same effect on George as it had on the bird it was named after.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"I thought I'd better pick up Deputy Walts," I said. "We'll follow you over to the cemetery."

"Don't know what good it'll do. They're long gone by now."

George dropped the truck into

gear in a manner that would make a mechanic cringe and lurched out into the street. He proceeded down the deserted street and turned onto Willow Creek Road, pointedly ignoring the stop sign at the edge of town.

We arrived at Willow Creek Cemetery ten minutes later. There was a full moon overhead, and ground fog was rolling eerily over the surrounding fields. It was cold, and I could see my breath on the night air.

The door of Mackey's truck creaked open, then slammed. The noise set a dog at a distant farmhouse barking.

"Over here," Mackey said.

It was much the same as before, but this time only four graves had been opened. Three were close by, and the other was sixty feet farther on.

I turned my flashlight toward the damp earth surrounding the closest open grave. "Watch where you step, George!" I said. There were footprints and a clear set of tire tracks, and I didn't want him trampling all over the evidence again.

Walts started over toward the far grave.

I played the beam of my flashlight over the three nearest headstones. Again, all 1939.

George bent over to pick something up from the grass at his feet. Something that glinted

in the moonlight.

"Sheriff Bigelow," Walts said, "I think you'd better come over here." He was standing over the open grave at the edge of the cemetery, shining his flashlight down inside. His voice sounded a little strange.

I doubt if the grave had been intended for double occupancy, but that's how things had turned out.

An old man in a denim work shirt lay face down in the dirt at the bottom of the hole. From the look of things, someone had whacked him across the back of the head with a shovel and started to fill the hole back in.

"Oh, Lordy!" George exclaimed. He had apparently been prepared for the possibility that someone might have made off with one of his bodies, but certainly not for an extra one's being dropped off in so informal a manner. He hiccupped, pulled the flask from his back pocket, and drained off what remained in three clearly audible gulps.

I slid down into the hole. My first impression had told me that the old man was dead. A quick check for a pulse confirmed it.

"Better radio for an ambulance," I said to Walts. "You can tell them there's no hurry."

"Right." Walts trotted off toward the car.

"Who do you s'pose he is?" George whispered.

"One of your body snatchers, I guess." I clambered up out of the grave, with George helping by tugging on my coat sleeve. After I was up, he kept hanging on to it.

"What do you s'pose they were up to?"

I recoiled, shaking him off my sleeve. If old George happened to breathe on an open flame, he'd be in serious trouble.

"Beats the hell outta me, George."

Things had decidedly taken a turn for the worse. To begin with, we'd had some nefarious creep digging up cemeteries by moonlight. I'll admit that had gotten me a little riled, but I could live with it. A guy had to. Nefarious creeps just aren't all that uncommon nowadays.

Murder, though, was another matter entirely. A murderer running around loose in Constantine County was something I simply couldn't tolerate.

Walts approached from the direction of the squad car. "They'll be out in about twenty minutes. I told Bernice to call Jerry, too. Figured you'd want some first-class pictures on this one."

"Good idea," I said. "I saw some footprints and tire tracks over by the other grave. Why don't you get out the kit and

make some casts before everything gets ruined."

"Sure thing." He turned back toward the car.

Old George was watching the proceedings now with considerable interest. He still had something in his hand—the something I'd seen him pick up just before Walts had found the body.

"What did you find, George?" I asked.

"Huh?" He looked down at his hand, then extended whatever it was in my direction.

I reached out and took it.

It was an old nickel-plated pocket watch, all corroded around the edges. It had been the unbroken crystal that had reflected the moonlight. I turned it over under the beam of my flashlight, wiping the dirt away with my thumb.

There was an inscription on the back, faint but still legible. The name "Wilcox" filled the center, inscribed large in an engraver's ornate cursive. Smaller words circled the rim. I read them aloud: "To Clyde on your fiftieth birthday. Your loving wife, Emma. June 14, 1927."

The grave where we'd just found the body of the old man belonged to one Clyde Wilcox, born June 14, 1887, died November 15, 1939. So much for its being a clue to the identity of our victim. Or for providing

a hint at the killer's motive, for that matter. It wasn't exactly Tut's burial treasure. It certainly wasn't something you'd knock a man's head in to possess.

I stuck it in my pocket.

We didn't get out of there until well after sunrise. By then I was beginning to feel the effects of having had only four hours of sleep. I had Walts drop me off at home, intending to do something about that.

By the time I was back under the covers, our "unknown male Caucasian, age approximately seventy years" was already resting comfortably on a slab over in Doc McIlroy's office, awaiting the good doctor's attentions later in the morning. So far, the only remarkable thing about his latest guest was a complete lack of identification.

Doc seemed to have been unusually interested in the old man's teeth when he'd first examined the body at the scene of the murder. If he'd noticed something significant, though, he'd kept it to himself.

Doc's like that. He plays for effect, and likes nothing better than giving the appearance of pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

I was hoping he would manage something along those lines fairly soon. Luther Kroger, our illustrious county prosecutor,

would be breathing down my neck before the day was out, demanding that I arrest *somebody* for murder.

Hell—I didn't even know who was dead yet.

I won't go so far as to say that I don't believe in coincidences, but I *do* hold them to be highly suspect. When a report came in late Thursday night from an elderly woman who thought she had seen a prowler, the fact that her last name was Wilcox certainly wasn't lost on me.

Melinda Wilcox lived in Corinth, a flyspeck on the map some twenty miles southeast of Mecklin. Her big old house sat on the edge of town and belonged to a bygone era. It differed from its closest neighbors only in that, at nearly eleven o'clock at night, its every window was ablaze with light.

I pulled up to the curb and turned on the spotlight, probing the recesses at either side of the house from the safety of the squad car. As I slammed the door and started up the walk, I had a glimpse of someone peeking out at me through the lace curtains inside the front door.

I knocked and stood waiting. There was the sound of a latch being turned and of someone fumbling with a safety

chain—two devices with little more than psychological value on a door with so many glass panes.

The door opened a crack.

"Yes?" The voice was small and tremulous.

"I'm Sheriff Bigelow, ma'am. Are you the party that reported a prowler?"

"Yes, I am." She unfastened the chain and opened the door a little wider. "Won't you please come in?"

"I think I'd better have a look around first. Where was it that you saw him?"

"Out in the back. I didn't actually see anybody. I just heard some glass break. I think someone may have been trying to get into my cellar."

"Go ahead and lock back up," I said. "I'll knock again when I'm done."

The front door closed, and the latch clicked.

I went around toward the back between the side of the house and a tall hedge, flashlight in my left hand and gun in my right. Had I been following procedure, my gun would have been holstered.

There are times, I have learned, when following the prescribed procedure can get a man in very serious trouble.

I wished Walts had come with me, then chided myself for the thought. It wouldn't have been

fair to wake him up over something as trivial as a prowler call, especially since he'd covered for me all morning and most of the afternoon while I caught up on my sleep.

As it turned out, the backyard was empty. At the far end a gate stood open, hinges creaking in the wind. It led out to a narrow lane that ran along a field. I went over to have a look.

I played my flashlight over the ground. There were fresh tire tracks. Maybe I'd slop some plaster around, I thought. Why not? The stuff is cheap.

I turned my attention to the cellar door, four steps down and set into a cut stone foundation. A pane of glass had been broken out, and the heavy brass padlock that secured the door showed definite signs of an attempted forced entry.

I went around to the front of the house by way of the other side, holstering my .38 before knocking at the front door.

"Did you find anything, sheriff?"

"Looks like somebody tried to pry the lock off your cellar door. They broke a pane of glass, but there doesn't seem to be any other damage."

"Please," she said. "Come inside. Would you like some coffee? I have a fresh pot on."

"That sounds real good." I stepped through the door, un-

zipping my coat. "It's gotten chilly out. I wouldn't be surprised if we got a hard frost by morning."

I followed Melinda Wilcox through a foyer, across a darkened, Victorian-looking parlor, and into the kitchen. The kitchen was bright and warm, with a chrome-legged table and matching chairs and worn linoleum on the floor. There was a squat white refrigerator that must have been twenty years old. On the wall above it, there was one of those plastic clocks that looks like a cat. You know the kind I mean. The pendulum is the tail, and the eyes move back and forth with each swing.

Melinda Wilcox no doubt had been small, even as a mature woman, and her stature had been further diminished with the passing of a great number of years. She was quick to inform me that she was eighty-three years old. A sprightly eighty-three, I observed. She was quick and alert, moving around her vast kitchen with rapid, tiny steps, leaning all the while on a shiny black cane.

She poured coffee into a china cup, the spout of the pot tapping lightly against the porcelain with the shaking of her blue-veined hands.

"Would you like cream and sugar, Sheriff Bigelow?"

"No, thank you."

"I think I'll have a cup myself," she said. "I doubt if I'll be able to sleep anyway, after all this excitement." She poured a second cup and arranged herself in a chair across the table from me. "Elderly people seldom sleep well, you know. I believe I read somewhere that it has to do with the metabolism." She smiled in a charming fashion, revealing a nicely fitted set of dentures. "Of course a man of your age wouldn't know anything about that."

That's the sort of comment that will keep me happy for a solid week.

"Do you have any idea who might have tried to break into your house, Mrs. Wilcox?"

"Miss," she corrected me. "I am an old maid." For a moment she seemed to slip far away, as if considering how she had come to be so, then suddenly she was back. "No—I really have no idea. But so much of this sort of thing goes on these days that I'm surprised I haven't been bothered before now."

"You live alone here?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Do you have any family in town?"

"Now, sheriff. I've lived in this big old house for over sixty years, and I feel perfectly safe and at home here. The doors and the windows all have locks, and if anyone bothers me again,

I'll simply pick up my telephone like I did tonight."

"I'll send my deputy over tomorrow to take another look around in the daylight, though I doubt if he'll find much. I'll have him check your doors and windows, too, just to be on the safe side."

"That's very kind of you," she said.

I wasn't quite sure how to bring up what I wanted to talk about next. It had to be talked about, though. "I—uh—I suppose you read about the problems we've had over at the Oak Knoll Cemetery."

"Why, yes!" she said. "I think it's simply terrible!"

There was an awkward silence. On the wall, the cat ticked.

"Something very similar happened last night," I said. "This time over at Willow Creek."

I had halfway expected some sort of a reaction. All I got was silence and a blank stare. Apparently the name *had* been nothing more than a coincidence.

"I don't understand why you're telling me this," she said. "It certainly can't have anything to do with me."

"Of course not. It's just that one of the graves that had been disturbed belonged to a man by the name of Clyde Wilcox. I was

afraid you might have known..."

I hauled up short. I'd gotten a reaction, all right.

Her voice was so low it was almost inaudible. "My father's name was Clyde Wilcox."

Damn, I thought. "And your mother?"

"Emma," she said. "Her maiden name was Emma Morrison."

"Oh." I fiddled with the coffee cup. "I see."

Her eyes were intent on my face.

"There's no need to worry," I said abruptly. "There wasn't really that much damage, and everything's been put right now. I'm—I'm sorry to have had to bring it up at all."

She gave me a long, searching look which rapidly turned into one of pure puzzlement. "I know what you're thinking, sheriff, but it's simply not possible."

"I'm afraid it is," I said. "Clyde Wilcox. Born June 14, 1877. Died..."

"No!" She was shaking her head. "I don't understand this at all. My father *was* born on June 14, 1877. But his people were all from Indiana. There's a family cemetery there. *That's* where he and my mother are buried, sheriff. Not in Missouri."

My discomfiture at broaching

a painful topic was rapidly giving way to confusion. All of a sudden, questions were buzzing around inside my head like a swarm of angry hornets.

I suppose it's human nature to want to find easy answers for complicated questions. That's what I wanted; and that's what I did.

With predictable results, I might add.

By Friday afternoon, Doc McIlroy was ready with his rabbit-in-the-hat trick.

He came through my office door lost in thought, puffing absently on his pipe. After a moment, he dropped it carelessly into a pocket of the lab coat he wore over his fall tweeds.

Doc can be a real fire hazard.

He glanced around the room, pleased to find that his audience would be somewhat larger than expected. Walts was still there, having found some excuse to delay his departure for Corinth and the Wilcox place; so was Carmen Willowby, who had shown up only moments before Walts had started making excuses.

Doc took a seat, favoring Carmen with a nod and a wink. He settled back, lacing his fingers behind his head, and pretended to study the paint flaking off my office ceiling.

"Is this a social call?" I inquired.

Doc dropped his gaze toward me. "Nope. I've got an I.D. for you on the old man, if you're still interested." He paused a moment for dramatic effect. "It was his teeth that gave him away."

"How do you mean?" Carmen asked. A notepad and pencil had appeared out of nowhere, as had a pair of reading glasses.

"His dental work had a certain look to it," Doc said. "What you might call 'institutional ineptness,' for want of a better descriptive phrase."

"I don't follow you," Carmen said.

"The overall quality of the workmanship was very poor," Doc explained. "I guessed he'd had his teeth fixed in prison. An institutional practice is occasionally the refuge of the barely competent medical practitioner."

"Something like the position of county coroner," I commented.

"I haven't had any complaints yet," Doc replied dryly. He turned back toward Carmen. "The laundry marks on his clothing seemed to point toward the same conclusion, and the fact that the markings had scarcely faded suggested a fairly recent release date. I teletyped his description to the State De-

partment of Corrections, and had a probable I.D. on him this morning. When his records came in over the wire a while ago, I was certain."

"They sure narrowed it down quick," Walts commented. "There must have been a lot of prisoners who fit his description turned loose over the last few months."

"But not so many of his age," Doc explained. "Your average convict is fairly young. This guy was almost as old as Sheriff Bigelow there."

I'd been waiting for that. "You gonna tell us his name, or not?" I asked.

"Benjamin Simms," Doc said. "Age sixty-nine. He was released from Kuypersville State Prison about six weeks back. He was certainly no stranger to the place. The man did time in Leavenworth, and elsewhere. He seems to have spent more time inside than out." Doc reached into a pocket of his lab coat and pulled out a rather lengthy teletyped message. "His records."

"Thanks," I said.

"Don't mention it."

"What was he sent up for?" Walts asked. His late-night movie vernacular was surfacing again.

"You name it," Doc responded. "His most recent stint was for armed robbery, about

five years back. He was sentenced to ten, but they let him out early because of his age."

Great, I thought. Now they're having Seniors' Day at the parole board hearings.

I glanced over the pages covering the last few years, then put the papers aside for later. I wanted to read through them uninterrupted.

Carmen gestured with her pencil. "Mind if I take a look at that?"

"Be my guest," I said. "Just don't use anything without checking with me first."

Carmen began reading, with Walts looking over her shoulder.

"What do you suppose Benjamin Simms was doing robbing graves?" Doc asked.

"I haven't got a clue," I admitted. "But there *does* seem to be some sort of a connection between him and an elderly woman over in Corinth. Her name is Melinda Wilcox."

"Wilcox..." Doc McIlroy tugged thoughtfully at his lower lip. "Wasn't Wilcox the name on the headstone where the old man's body was found?"

I nodded. "Clyde Wilcox. He was Melinda Wilcox's father. Trouble is, he's supposed to have been buried somewhere else. In Indiana, according to the old lady."

"Now that *is* damned odd,"

Doc said. "How'd she get involved in the investigation in the first place? You mentioned a connection . . ."

"Somebody tried to break into her cellar last night. Tire tracks I found behind her house match tracks we found over at Willow Creek."

"Hmm. What does she have to say about all this?"

"Not much," I said. "She just keeps insisting that her father isn't buried at Willow Creek Cemetery in the first place."

"So how does she explain the watch you found up there?"

"I didn't tell her about it," I said. "I'm not much of a psychologist, but it crossed my mind that maybe she just can't deal with the fact that somebody dug up her father's grave. I couldn't see much point in forcing her to face up to it."

Doc nodded. "It may be best to leave it alone. Anyway, it's clear enough that the grave belonged to her father. The headstone says so; the watch would seem to clinch it."

It seemed like a good time to interject a little levity into the conversation. "Have you heard Luther Kroger's latest theory?" I asked.

Doc McIlroy shook his head, a pained smile flickering on his lips.

"He thinks George Mackey did it."

"Aha!"

"He figures ol' George and the deceased had a grave-robbery scheme going, and were methodically looting our county cemeteries of all their buried valuables. The other night George and his accomplice had some sort of falling out, so George bashed his head in with a shovel."

"That's absolutely brilliant," Doc said. "Luther should have taken over the family hardware business like his old man wanted."

"Hey!" Carmen broke in. "It says here that Benjamin Simms was convicted of bank robbery, way back in 1936."

"Like I said," Doc commented, "the man had a long and illustrious career."

Carmen's wide blue eyes regarded us over the tops of her reading glasses. "It says he was captured in Constantine County."

I reached for the papers.

The printout provided a detailed account of Benjamin Simms's exploits, back so far as the fifties. Prior to that, the information was skimpy. Doc explained that the Department of Corrections hadn't begun computerizing their files until the late sixties and had only seen fit to transcribe complete records for the preceding ten years or so.

"So where do we get the earlier stuff?" I asked.

"We don't," Doc said. "They had a fire a few years back."

If you think computerized records are any safer, you've never held a match to a piece of plastic.

Anyhow, what Carmen had already told us was about all there was to tell. With one very notable exception: Simms had escaped from prison, following that first conviction in 1936, and had later been recaptured.

I glanced up at Carmen. The significance of the next item clearly had not been lost on her.

The second time he had been taken into custody had also been in Constantine County.

In November, 1939.

I refolded the teletyped message and put it back on top of my desk. I still had no idea what was going on, but a few shadowy outlines were beginning to take form. That, and a little plot to get some volunteer work out of a certain young lady who was not on the county payroll.

"Walts," I said, "don't you think it's about time you got over to the Wilcox place?"

He took his jacket and hat from the hall tree and started for the door.

"Mind if I come along?" Carmen asked.

Walts stood frozen in the

doorway, with his jacket half-way on.

"That might not be a bad idea," I said. "Melinda Wilcox might tell you something that she wouldn't mention to Walts or me. Go ahead. If Deputy Walts has no objections, of course..."

Deputy Walts didn't mind in the least.

Carmen turned up again early the following morning, entering my office without bothering to knock. To do so might have presented some problems: Both hands were fully occupied with the substantial stack of loose papers she was carrying.

I hastily tried to get organized. Some impression I must have made—criminals running wild all over Constantine County and there sat the sheriff, feet up on his desk, reading the sports page and putting away the last of the morning's glazed doughnuts.

"Got a minute?" she asked. "I've got the stuff you wanted."

"Sure. Come on in." I wiped some stray crumbs of sugar from my chin.

She searched my cluttered desktop for a bare spot, then unceremoniously dumped the papers on it before they had a chance to escape to the floor. "I must have spent half the

night digging through the morgue over at the *Gazette*," she was saying.

"If you keep this up, we're going to have to put you on the payroll."

The situation was a little embarrassing. Carmen had gone to a whole lot more trouble than I'd intended.

She was sorting through the stack, pulling an occasional copy out and putting it to one side. "Why don't you start reading through these while I finish getting the rest organized," she suggested. "I had them all in order, but the wind got 'em on the way over."

I took the ones she'd already pulled out. The assortment consisted of a dozen or so articles that had appeared in old issues of the *Gazette*, apparently copied during the course of a laborious search through their microfilm files. She had thoughtfully circled the relevant story on each page, and written the date of publication along the border.

The one on top was dated August 23, 1936. It was a headline story and had to do with a bank robbery, right here in Mecklin.

Three men, the article said, as yet unidentified, had made off with an estimated eighteen thousand dollars, leaving behind a dead teller and a seriously wounded bank guard. One

of the robbers had been shot, but all three had managed to escape in a black Buick sedan. It was suspected that they were the same men who were responsible for a dozen bank robberies over the past few months, stretching from northern Indiana to southern Iowa. If so, their take to date had been estimated at something in the neighborhood of eighty-five thousand dollars.

Eighty-five thousand dollars! Even now, that was a very substantial sum of money. In 1936, it had been an unimaginable fortune.

The second article was dated two days later. All roads and highways leading out of Constantine County had been blocked since shortly after the robbery. Owing to the speed made possible by the recent innovation of radio-equipped squad cars, it was thought very unlikely that the desperate band of criminals had managed to escape. It was theorized that they had taken refuge somewhere close at hand. The story ended with a strong warning to the citizens of Constantine County—especially those living in the outlying farm communities—to be on their guard against strangers fitting the rather sketchy descriptions that eyewitnesses had been able to provide. County medical prac-

tioners in particular were encouraged to exercise extreme caution in responding to calls for assistance.

I read quickly through the remaining copies. There was an account of the bank teller's funeral. The unnamed guard would live but might never walk again. The FBI had arrived on the scene, but had so far succeeded only in antagonizing the local police and press with their "condescending attitudes."

As the days had passed without new developments, the articles had become shorter and shorter, gradually drifting toward the back pages of the *Gazette*. Finally, at the end of a second uneventful week, there had been speculation that the men had somehow managed to elude police and FBI alike. "In all probability," the article said, "they are now far from Constantine County, lighting cigars with ten dollar bills and laughing at J. Edgar Hoover with every other puff."

It had been only two days later that events proved otherwise. When the story had hit page one again, it had done so with a vengeance.

The three fugitives had made an attempt to run a police roadblock on the Constantine county line. Unfortunately, they had unwittingly chosen one rein-

forced by agents of the FBI.

The driver had attempted a high-speed bootlegger's turn but had succeeded only in flipping the big Buick off the road into a field. It had immediately become the focal point of a hail of rifle and machine gun fire. The three had somehow managed to escape to the cover of a drainage ditch, an instant before the car had exploded into a searing ball of flame.

In the gun battle that followed, one had been shot and killed before the remaining two had come to realize the hopelessness of their situation. The dead man—one Angelo Scarlotti—was later identified as the man who had ruthlessly gunned down the two bank employees. In the typically hard-boiled newspaper prose of the thirties, he was characterized as "a smalltime Chicago hood with an itchy trigger-finger and big-time ideas."

Of the survivors, Patrick Kelly—the gunman who had been wounded during the robbery—was described as "a darkly handsome, smooth-talking young man with the manners of a real gentleman." Kelly, it turned out, had been the mastermind behind the entire string of robberies. And the other . . .

"Benjamin Simms!"

"I thought you'd like that," Carmen said.

There was an indistinct photograph of the two being led away in handcuffs, flanked by federal agents who looked as if they were costumed to try out for parts on *The Untouchables*.

Forty-eight years make a big difference in a man's appearance, but the face of the one on the left was unmistakable.

It was that of the old man we'd found murdered up at Willow Creek Cemetery.

The second stack of copies dealt with the trial that had followed. It had never been discovered where the three had been hiding during the interval between the day of the robbery and the day of their encounter with the police. As for the eighty-five thousand dollars—the suitcase full of paper that had cost two men their lives—it had gone up in flames, incinerated in the trunk of the black Buick.

Each of the surviving gunmen had drawn thirty years in Leavenworth, and had probably considered himself lucky to have escaped electrocution. The conviction had been obtained without the testimony of the wounded guard, who apparently had still been in pretty bad shape and had refused to cooperate with the federal prosecutors out of fear of reprisal.

"That's about it," Carmen said. "Except for these." She

slid the last of the copies across my desk.

First there was an article off the wire service that had appeared in the *Gazette* on October 31, 1939. Two notorious bank robbers—Patrick Kelly and Benjamin Simms—had escaped from Fort Leavenworth Federal Prison three days earlier. Both were still at large. It was noted in passing that the two had originally been apprehended near Mecklin, Missouri, following a bank robbery there that had resulted in the death of a bank employee. The two were armed and were considered highly dangerous.

The next copy was of a headline story from the *Gazette*, dated November 16, 1939. It might have seemed unrelated to the others in our little collection, but I was beginning to entertain a suspicion that it wasn't.

The story had to do with one of the greatest railroad disasters in the history of Constantine County. On the night of November 15, a westbound express train, carrying one hundred and fifty-three passengers, had collided head-on with an eastbound freighter hurtling across the snow-covered fields toward St. Louis. There had been a curve, and parallel sets of tracks. Presumably each engineer had thought that the rapidly approaching headlight

would momentarily fly by to one side—an error that had cost over a hundred people their lives.

The accounts that had been written over the days following the accident were grim indeed. A number of the bodies had not been identifiable, and some that had been had gone unclaimed. Others known to have been on the train could not be found. Of the fifty or so who had—by some miracle—survived the crash, more than a dozen weren't expected to live out the week.

There were half a dozen more articles dealing with the aftermath of the disaster. Unfortunately, none provided any additional information that helped me with my problem.

The final item that Carmen had unearthed was also of considerable interest. It was dated November 21, 1939, and told of the apprehension of Benjamin Simms.

His second encounter with the police had been a lot less spectacular than the first. He'd been found hiding in a barn by a local farmer, half frozen, half starved, and more nearly dead than alive. It wasn't clear what had happened to him, but he appeared to have been severely beaten. He had to be carried out, and was taken to the hospital rather than the county jail.

That was the point where the pieces really started falling into place.

A few of them, anyway.

"I suppose it was the date on the headstones that got you started on this," Carmen said.

I nodded. "That and my recollection that the train wreck had happened that year."

"What conclusions have you drawn?"

I leaned back in my chair. "Somebody has been digging up graves all over Constantine County. They all belong to men who died in November, 1939. So it's clear that somebody was looking for something worth going to a lot of trouble for. Right?"

"Right."

"It's just as clear that they didn't know the name on the grave they were trying to locate, but that the approximate time and place of death were known. A train wreck with victims dying over a period of several days would account for it."

"Except for one thing," Carmen said. "All the graves that were dug up belonged to *known* people. Their names are right on the headstones. And most of them probably didn't have anything to do with the train wreck."

"But suppose there had been a mistaken identification of one of the victims right after the

accident." I said. "Think about the pocket watch. Think about what Melinda Wilcox said about her father's being buried in Indiana. Think about the missing eighty-five thousand dollars, and about where Simms and Kelly might have been hiding during those two weeks before they were captured."

Carmen leaned forward. "I thought the money burned up in the car."

"That's only what *they* said happened."

A sudden look of comprehension came into her eyes. "They were hiding at the Wilcox house!"

"Exactly. And during their stay there, Kelly came into possession of the pocket watch. He kept it, and he had it with him on the night of the train wreck. When no one claimed the body, he was buried over at Willow Creek Cemetery. The name and date of birth on the headstone were derived from the inscription on the watch."

"And that's how Benjamin Simms came to be hiding in the barn. He was injured in the wreck, and was too badly hurt to get any farther."

I nodded.

"But what about the real Clyde Wilcox?" Carmen asked.

I opened my desk drawer, and took out a copy of the death certificate I'd found an hour ear-

lier, over at the county health department. "The real Clyde Wilcox died in 1933. As Melinda said, his body was sent back to Indiana for burial."

Carmen looked puzzled. "But the money couldn't possibly have been in the grave."

"It wasn't," I said. "I think it's hidden somewhere on the Wilcox property. It was the watch that the graverobbers were after. After forty years, Simms simply couldn't recall where he and Kelly and Scarlotti had holed up after the robbery. He may have known the name of the town, but he couldn't recall which house it had been. He couldn't remember the names of the people there, either. Well, the name was on the watch. And he had a pretty good idea where *that* was."

Carmen looked thoughtful. "So Melinda Wilcox knows a good deal more than she's telling."

"Let's just say that she knew a good deal that she didn't tell the police forty-eight years ago. I seriously doubt if she's made a connection between what happened then and what's going on now."

"That still leaves a big unanswered question," Carmen said. "*Who killed Simms?*"

I spread my hands, palms up. "Waltz has been parked in front of Melinda Wilcox's home for

the last few nights, in case somebody decides to pay her another visit. He's been keeping a pretty high profile. Maybe it's time to make it look like we've pulled out, just to see who comes calling."

"Who do you suppose it might be? Someone from around here?"

"It's possible," I said. "More likely it's somebody Simms knew before he came back. Maybe someone he knew in prison."

"Is there any way to check?"

"There might be. I'm going over to Kuypersville this afternoon, to talk to one of Simms's old cellmates." I smiled. "'Course, whether he'll talk to me or not is another matter entirely."

I parked the car outside the prison walls in the shadow of a guard tower and made my way to the warden's office. Fifteen minutes later I was sitting in a day room, across a table from Bobby Jakes.

Jakes looked to be in his mid-fifties, with close-cropped gray hair and alert blue eyes. He had been Benjamin Simms's roommate for the three years preceding his parole.

"So you're Bigelow," he stated. He took a deep drag on an unfiltered Camel, and spat away a bit of tobacco that stuck to his lip.

I nodded.

Jakes smiled wryly. "You've got a friend or two inside."

"Funny how they never think to drop me a postcard."

Jakes fiddled with the cigarette. His fingers were stained with nicotine. "We heard about Benny."

"News travels fast, doesn't it?"

Jakes looked at me frankly. "I liked old Benny, sheriff. A lot of the guys did. What do you want to know?"

"What I want to know is, who do you think killed him?"

"That's easy. A guy by the name of Bill Salyers."

I hadn't expected cooperation, let alone such a direct answer. "Who's Bill Salyers? Why do you think he killed Benny?"

"Salyers is a psycho punk who was here for a long time. Story was, he nearly killed some kids. Tried to set 'em on fire with gasoline."

Christ.

"How'd he get out?"

Jakes shrugged. "He finished his sentence."

"What was Salyers's relationship to Benjamin Simms?" I asked.

"Benny was the only guy who'd have anything to do with him. Ol' Benny was like that—you know, friendly with everybody. Salyers fastened onto him like a leech."

"So why would he have wanted to kill him?" I asked.

"Because of the money," Jakes responded. "Benny had this cock-and-bull story about eighty grand he and some guys had stashed away back in the thirties. He and his partner were going back to get it, but something happened. His pal got killed, and he wound up back in the slammer."

"You didn't believe him?"

"Hell, no. It was just an old con's story." Jakes ground out the cigarette. "But Salyers believed him. He asked about it again and again. And Benny never got tired of telling."

"So you think they may have gotten together after Simms was released."

Jakes nodded. "I'm sure of it. Find Salyers, and you've got your killer."

He smiled.

"If you don't, you're gonna have some more bodies on your hands."

Walts and I were sitting in an unmarked car, a block down the street from the Wilcox place.

"So that's the story," I concluded.

Walts turned the watch over in his huge hand, tilting it against the feeble shine of a streetlight to better read the

inscription. "You think he'll show tonight?"

"I'm almost sure of it." I was checking my .38, hoping there would be no cause to use it. "I got the guy's records from the warden, and they pretty much bear out what Jakes told me. The man is unstable. Highly volatile. According to the psychiatrist who examined him, he has clear homicidal tendencies."

"I don't much like it that Carmen is in the house," Walts said.

"Neither do I." I holstered my pistol. "But she was worried about Melinda's being alone. Hell—I couldn't *order* her to leave. She's a strong-minded young lady, once she's set on something."

Walts thought that over. In what context, I couldn't say.

"I don't think she'll be in any particular danger," I said. "What Salyers is looking for is supposed to be in the basement."

"Right." Walts handed me the watch. "So what's the plan?" he asked.

"I think our best bet is to take him by surprise—to get the drop on him before he has time to think or react."

"How do you figure on doing that?"

"I'll wait outside in the bushes," I said. "You'll wait in the basement, with your hand on the light switch. We'll let

him pry the padlock off and go in. I'll follow right behind. When he comes through the doorway, you hit the lights. If he has a gun, he probably won't have it out. With one of us on either side of him, he won't try for it."

"That sounds like it ought to work," Walts said. "Except I don't much like the idea of being locked up in a dark basement. Why should I be the one inside?"

"Because I'm the sheriff and you're the deputy. Don't worry," I said. "It won't be for more than a few hours."

"A few *hours!*" Walts was clearly less than happy at the prospect. "What'll I *do* down there?"

"Wait and listen."

"Wonderful."

We got out of the car, each with a walkie-talkie in hand.

"Put the earplug on the radio," I said. "We don't want that thing squawking and giving us away."

"Right."

We went up to the front door, and I rang the bell. Carmen Willowby opened it, without turning on the porch lights. "Anything unusual going on out there?" she inquired.

"Not yet," I said. "Have you got the key?"

She dropped it in my hand.

"How's Melinda taking all this?" I asked.

"She keeps asking why you're so certain the prowler is coming back. When are you going to explain it to her?"

"Just as soon as we have Bill Salyers under wraps," I said. "Keep the door locked. We'll let you know when it's all over."

The door closed, and the latch clicked.

"Okay, Walts," I said. "It's time to visit the rats."

"Rats?"

"Only little ones."

We went around behind the house, and I unlocked the basement door. Walts had to stoop to go inside.

I played my flashlight around the dark interior, the center of which was dominated by a sprawling oil furnace. There were bundles of tied-up newspapers and old magazines, shelves of dusty Mason jars and flower pots, and all the other normal refuse that tends to accumulate in a disused cellar.

I pulled a chain hanging from an upstairs floor joist, and the damp basement was bathed in the feeble glow of a forty-watt bulb.

"You'll have to keep the light out," I said.

Walts was cautiously probing the dark corners with the beam of his flashlight. He had armed himself with a broom handle.

I hunted up some twine which I tied to the end of the light

chain. This allowed Deputy Walts to take a position on a bundle of *Life* magazines stacked against the far wall, and to turn the light on without moving.

"There you go," I said. "All comfy?"

If looks could kill, the citizens of Constantine County would have been looking for a new sheriff.

I left the basement, padlocking the door behind me, and pulled a folding lawn chair over among the bushes, where I sat down to wait.

It must have been about forty degrees out, and very damp. I snapped the collar of my coat shut. It was going to be a very long night.

"Sheriff Bigelow?" Walts' voice came faintly through the earplug. "Sheriff Bigelow?"

I unclipped the radio from my belt, and held it close to my lips. "Yeah? What is it?"

"How long has it been?"

I glanced at the glowing dial of my watch. "Fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen *minutes*?" There was a pause. "Jesus—it seems like an *hour*."

"Just keep quiet and listen."

I was getting damned cold. My knees were shaking. I stood up, keeping to the shadows, and shuffled around to keep the old circulation going. At least Walts was warm. I wished I'd thought to bring a thermos of coffee.

I glanced at my watch again, noting that an hour had finally crept by. In the house, the lights downstairs went off. A few minutes later the upstairs lights went out as well. Carmen was doing a good job of keeping up an appearance of normality.

I sat back down.

Two hours. The moon had risen, casting ghostly shadows over the yard. My shoes were wet with cold dew, and my knees had developed a will of their own. The radio had been silent since Walts had last called, save for occasional police transmissions originating from beyond Constantine County.

I suspected that Walts had dozed off in his corner of the basement.

Suddenly there was a familiar voice: "This is Mecklin, calling Sheriff Bigelow. Over." It was Bernice, our night-shift radio dispatcher. "This is Mecklin. You out there, sheriff? Over."

I put the walkie-talkie to my lips, not expecting much. The signal from our base station back in Mecklin was weak enough, and my own radio only put out a meagre five watts.

"This is Sheriff Bigelow. Over."

"That you, sheriff? I can hardly make you out."

"This is Bigelow. You're com-

ing through very faintly. Over.”

I cranked the volume up all the way.

“YOU WANTED SOMETHING, SHERIFF?”

It was Walts, in the basement twenty feet away, who had nearly broken my eardrum.

“Keep quiet, Walts!” I whispered fiercely. “I’m trying to talk to Bernice.”

“SORRY.”

Bernice’s voice was fading in and out now, punctuated by bursts of static: “Sheriff? I’m not copying you. If you can hear me, I just wanted to pass this on. We had a DOA a while ago at County General. Doc McIlroy said to tell you it looks like a homicide. He said . . .” There was a pop and a hiss, then: “. . . had been dead three or four hours. He was found in a motel room. Doc said to tell you the driver’s license on the body . . .” Bernice’s voice faded completely away.

“Say again?”

“Doc said to tell you the body has been positively identified as Bill Salyers.”

Damn. Walts and I were lying in wait for a dead man.

“Thanks, Bernice,” I said.

Walts, with his radio below ground level, would have heard only my half of the conversation. I hastily turned down the volume control, beating him by only an instant.

“What’s up, sheriff?”

“I was talking to Bernice. It seems Bill Salyers has gotten himself murdered.”

From somewhere out in the darkness, there came a sharp metallic *snap*.

“So what are we waiting around here for?” Walts asked.

“Quiet!” I whispered. “I think I heard something.”

A moment passed as I listened intently for an unusual noise. The house and yard remained deathly quiet, save for the rustle of dry leaves in the wind. Then, just as I’d decided there was nothing amiss, there came the unmistakable sound of breaking glass.

It had seemed to come from somewhere around toward the front.

I noticed that my hand was on the butt of my .38, and that I had unconsciously unsnapped the holster. I clipped the radio to my belt, leaving the earplug in my ear, and took my flashlight in my left hand.

I hurried along the side of the house toward the edge of the front porch, and stood listening from just around the corner. A cut telephone wire hung limply at my elbow, slowly twisting in the wind. I pressed my back to the wall and brought my revolver to the ready.

There was utter silence.

Crouching low, I cautiously

peered around the corner. The porch was bathed in moonlight. There was no one.

I went around to the front and climbed the steps.

I flicked on my flashlight. Someone had stuck tape across a pane of glass in the front door, then neatly knocked it out.

There was a tiny voice in my ear. "Sheriff Bigelow?" It was Walts. "Sheriff? I think I hear someone moving around upstairs."

Oh hell. I reached down to shut off the radio, opened the front door, and went inside.

In police work, there's really no such thing as a controlled situation.

I crossed the unlit foyer, entered the darkened parlor, and stopped at the base of the stairway. There were muffled voices overhead. One was that of Carmen Willowby. I couldn't make out the words, but there was a note of fear in her voice.

A door opened at the top of the stairs, and light streaming down from the room beyond cast the elongated shadows of two figures across the floor in front of me. I ducked back into the darkness just as the top stair creaked.

They reached the bottom of the stairway. Carmen was in front, her face catching the faint light of the moon that spilled in through the lace-curtained

windows. A figure pressed close behind her, drawing her head roughly back by a fistful of blonde hair.

There was a steely glint at her throat.

The blade of a knife.

"The key," a voice rasped. He gave her hair a sharp jerk.

I felt a jolt of recognition. I *knew* that voice.

"It's in the kitchen."

The hand holding the knife lowered, and the figure shoved Carmen in the direction of the kitchen. She slipped, falling to her knees.

That was the moment. I stepped forward, clutching the butt of the pistol tightly in my fist, and brought it down smartly on the man's head.

He dropped like a sack of potatoes, taking a telephone and its stand along with him.

I felt over the wall and found the light switch. "You all right?" I asked Carmen.

She nodded, her face pale. I could tell she wasn't, but she hid it very well.

"What about Melinda?"

"She's okay," Carmen said. "She's hiding upstairs in a closet."

At that moment there came three heavy thumps, each more violent than the last, followed by a fourth that was accompanied by breaking glass and splintering wood.

I'd forgotten about Walts, whom I'd left padlocked in the basement. The results were a seriously bruised shoulder and about three hundred dollars in structural damage to Melinda Wilcox's house.

Walts came bounding in through the front door, revolver drawn.

"You're late," I commented.

He holstered his gun and made a beeline to Carmen Willowby.

The crumpled figure in the corner was beginning to emit groans. I went over and picked up the knife, then pulled his arms around behind him and slipped on a pair of handcuffs.

"Hey!" Walts said. "That's George Mackey!"

"Yep." I rolled George over. His eyelids were beginning to flutter. "I should have figured it out before now." I pulled a long face. "Luther Kroger's never going to let me hear the end of this."

"I don't get it," Walts said. "How did George know about the money?"

"Simple. Benjamin Simms told him. Mackey must have caught him and Salyers over at Oak Knoll Cemetery on their first night out. I imagine he promised to help them in return for a cut."

"But why did he kill them?" Walts said.

"In Salyers' case, it was plain and simple greed. With Simms, it was revenge."

"Revenge? For what?"

"I think we're going to find out that ol' George here was the bank guard whom Scarlotti shot during the robbery, way back in '36. That's how George came by his bum leg. And that's why George figured the money was rightfully his. He only called us over to Willow Creek the other night to cover himself. I'll give odds that if we compare the casts of the tire tracks we found with the tires on George's pickup, we'll have a perfect match."

By the following afternoon, George Mackey was cooling his heels in a cell in the county jail.

Luther Kroger was preparing an indictment—or would be anyway, once he'd run out of people to call and tell how he'd solved the Willow Creek murder case. Walts, Carmen Willowby, and I were over at Melinda Wilcox's place, sitting around her kitchen table and sharing a pot of tea while we tied up a few loose ends.

"But why was it that you never went to the police?" Carmen was asking.

"I suppose I should have," Melinda said. "I knew what they'd done. But Mr. Kelly was

different from the other two. He was such a kind man. Such a gentleman. And he was so badly hurt! At first we thought for sure he was going to die. He would have, too, if it hadn't been for me."

"You were in love with him," Carmen said gently.

Melinda looked away from us, out through the kitchen window toward the distant fields. A moment passed, then she nodded. "I wasn't so very young by then, Miss Willowby. When I should have been thinking about love—about getting married—I was taking care of an ailing mother." She smiled sadly.

"Mr. Kelly was like a breath of spring air blowing into a sickroom. He made me feel a way I'd never felt before. When he promised he would come back, I never doubted him for a moment."

She glanced down at the pocket watch she had given to Patrick Kelly—almost half a century before, then placed it on the table. "And now I see that he *did* come back. But not for me."

I got to my feet, and Walts followed suit. "If you don't mind,

we really do have to take a look."

Melinda Wilcox nodded.

It didn't take Walts and me long to find it. There was a loose stone in the basement wall. In the hollow behind it, there was a rusted metal cash box.

I set it on the basement floor and used my pocketknife to scrape away the scales. Walts and I exchanged glances. I pried open the lid.

What we found inside was a moldy mass of confetti. A home for mice and beetles.

"Put it back," I said.

Walts returned the box to its hiding place and slid the stone back into the opening.

Melinda Wilcox watched us as we entered the kitchen.

I made a decision. An easy one.

I sat down at the table, shaking my head. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Two men dead, all over an old convict's fantasy."

Melinda Wilcox blinked, then slowly placed a trembling hand over the pocket watch. Her fingers closed, and she held onto it tightly.

I glanced at her as we left the room. Her eyes were moist, but she was smiling.

UNSOLVED

by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban")

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

.....

On Citrus Island, three tribes—the Whites, the Oranges, and the Lemons—have different standards of veracity. (They are otherwise indistinguishable.) Whites always tell the truth; Oranges always lie; Lemons, when asked a series of questions, tell the truth and lie alternately. A Lemon's first answer in a series may be either true or otherwise.

A visitor was somewhat confused recently when he was introduced to three natives named White, Orange, and Lemon, who are—not necessarily respectively—a White, an Orange, and a Lemon. There was also a fourth native named Yellow. The visitor asked each of the first three natives (a) what his own tribe was, and (b) what was Mr. Yellow's tribe.

To these questions, Mr. White replied: "I'm not a White. Mr. Yellow is an Orange."

Mr. Orange replied: "I'm not Orange. Mr. Yellow is a Lemon."

Mr. Lemon replied: "I'm not Lemon. Mr. Yellow is a White."

To which tribe does Mr. Yellow actually belong?

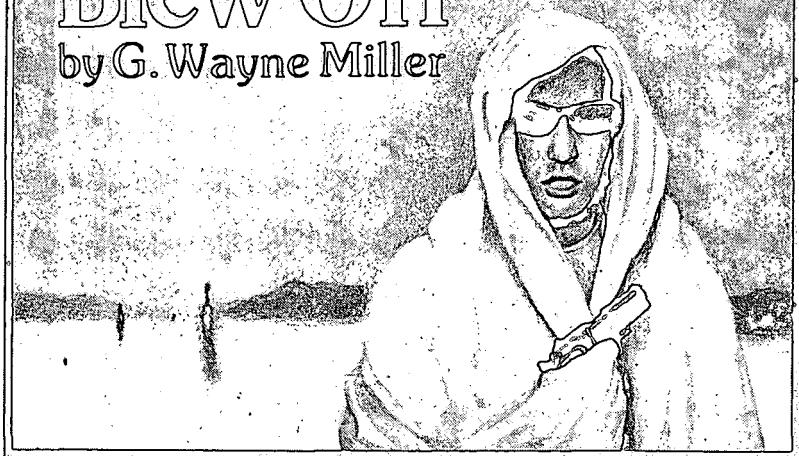
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See page 119 for the solution to the December puzzle.

"Mr. Yellow," taken from My Best Puzzles in Logic & Reasoning by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban"). Copyright © 1961 by Dover Publications, Inc., N.Y., N.Y.

Since the Sky Blew Off

by G. Wayne Miller



He was only a kid, seven, maybe eight years old. We never did get his name.

He arrived at dusk, and when no one answered his cries, he finally fell into a restless sleep in the dust and half-dead weeds along the front perimeter. Well before the sun was up, I shot him through the head. His body quivered a bit and then his mouth became a fountain of blood, but it didn't last long. In less than three minutes, long enough for a smoke, his nerves stopped firing and he was still.

Under brilliant starlight, Tony and I buried his body. You might wonder why we bothered, but those were Mather's orders. Mather was obsessed with germs, and he had every reason to be. We knew

Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

about other parts of the country, where whole camps had been wiped out by typhus, diphtheria, all the diseases that had gone completely out of control since the sky blew off. To be honest, we were scared shitless about germs, and we had every reason to be.

The kid was light and bony, more skeleton than meat. Underfed, I guess, like most roamers. Wearing gloves and masks, we carried him downhill, away from the hatchery, and put him ten feet under, as deep as we could dig in the two hours we had before the sun came up. Then we burned our clothes and bathed in rubbing alcohol and Lysol we'd come across on our last trip to the A&P warehouse. When we were done, we walked naked back inside the compound, pulling the razor wire tight behind us.

Right off, Mather had been uneasy about the kid. Not that we hadn't seen our share of roamers since coming north to Vermont a year ago, after the Great Fire leveled Boston and half of eastern Massachusetts. We'd seen them, all right, and mostly we'd let them pass on by. The only ones we'd disposed of were the ones that got too close or started acting too weird or hung around too long, like stray dogs begging for handouts. Creepy behavior like that set off alarm bells inside Mather's head.

I especially remember one old guy, batty as hell, his face covered with pus, his bald scalp peeling, his tongue swollen and hanging out of his mouth like a steer at an old-time Kansas City slaughterhouse. Howled at the gate like something out of a nightmare until we took care of him. I remember a teenage girl, too. She'd probably been pretty once, but the sun had left her skin runny and raw and made her hair fall out. She was delirious, talking nonsense about salvation, redemption, apocalypse, all that other Bible crap, like so many of the roamers we'd seen since New York.

The kid was different. I didn't see it right away, but Mather did, thank heavens. That sixth sense of his is what's kept us alive so long.

The kid arrived as the sun was going down. Since the sky blew off, every sunset has been spectacular, nothing any artist or photographer could ever hope to capture. This one was no exception. Pinks layered over blues and oranges and yellows, some soft strokes, some bold ones splashed up there with a powerful hand. Back when I was in parochial school, I remember thinking the walls of heaven must look that beautiful.

I was pulling guard duty and I spotted him when he was a half mile down the hill that leads up to the compound. He was all

bundled up in canvas, canvas that was ripped and tattered like a sail that'd spent a week in a hurricane. It didn't occur to me then, but somebody must have told him that canvas was about the best protection you could have when you were outside. Somebody older, wiser.

"He's reason to be alarmed," Mather announced after watching him through binoculars he'd customized with a pair of Polaroid sunglasses we'd looted from a Manhattan drugstore back in the beginning.

"We'll dispose of him," I answered. It was an automatic response by then, as natural and routine as guard duty or sleeping during the day.

"Naturally. But I'm not confident that will be the end of it."

"I don't get it."

Mather's face tightened, the way it always does when one of us is acting thick. "Look at him," he ordered.

I took his binoculars and got a good fix on the kid. He was on his ass, resting, looking our way and trying to figure if it was worth the effort to make the climb. Maybe trying to decide if he was going to get shot at.

"I'm looking."

"Zero in on his face."

"Okay."

"Tell me how old he is."

"Seven, eight," I said. "Somewhere in there. You never know with roamers."

"No, but one can determine outside limits. Will you accept twelve as his?"

"Certainly."

"Very good. Now when was the last time we saw a twelve-year-old kid? A twelve-year-old kid alone, to be precise."

I thought for a moment. I honestly couldn't remember.

"You can't remember, can you?"

"No, can't say as I do."

"Of course not. To my recollection, there never *has* been a twelve-year-old kid scouting our camp. Not alone. There have been twelve-year-old kids. Always in the company of grownups. And grownups—"

"—are something we can't take chances on."

"Precisely. Whoever he's with, they can't be far away."

"You want a disposal operation."

"I don't think we have a choice."

"You don't think they'll come looking for him?"

"Precisely what I'd like to prevent. We don't need another typhus scare."

"Or the rot."

"Or the rot."

"Or anything that's going to jeopardize these pregnancies."

"Jesus, no."

My eyes were still trained on the kid. He was on his feet again, stumbling our way. Apparently, he'd decided to take the risk coming up the hill. Maybe he was hungry. Or sick. Or sent to spy.

With roamers, you never knew.

"He's in pretty tough shape," I said as I watched him stumble, fall, and get on his feet again, like a drunk at closing hour at one of those midtown Manhattan bars we used to frequent in the old days. Except booze wasn't this kid's problem. It was the sun—one hundred thirty scorching, cloudless, breezeless degrees of it.

"I suggest," Mather said, "that we dispose of him tonight. Tomorrow night, you and Pete will take care of his family."

"Precisely," I said. Mather grinned. He always got a big kick out of it, any time one of us used one of his words like that.

At noon the day we buried the kid, we saw smoke, a single pencil-thin curl that rose into the sky like jet exhaust, except there weren't any jets any more. It was coming from the rubble that used to be Bradford Village, one of the suburbs of Burlington.

Mather called a huddle.

"They're cooking," he said. "Lord knows what."

"Maybe they caught some fish," said Tony. Since Robbie and Sloane got ambushed—it happened when we were escaping the Great Fire—Tony, Pete, Charles, Mather, and I were the only males in our camp.

"Assuming there are any left," Mather said. "And except for our hatchery, I doubt there are."

"How big do you figure their camp is?" Pete asked.

"Could be three or three hundred," Mather said. "Smoke's no clue."

"Better be closer to three," I said, and I meant it.

"I have every confidence in you," Mather replied, "whatever it is."

"We'll go well armed," I said.

Pete suddenly had that mongrel look on his face, a strange cross between outrage and guilt, but he didn't say anything. Pete was our resident tech whiz—he'd designed the hatchery, come up with the ventilation scheme that kept the temps down inside, even managed to hook up running water and plumbing. A smart guy, but soft around the edges. He'd told me more than once that killing still turned his stomach, no matter how many times he saw it or did it. It was a peculiar attitude to have after all the crap we'd been through.

"Remember, we can't afford any unnecessary expenditure of ammunition," Mather reminded us.

"We'll be careful," I said.

"Single shots if we can."

"We can."

"Now I think you boys ought to get some sleep," Mather said. "You've got a busy night ahead of you."

We left at dusk, Pete and I.

Those gorgeous pinks and yellows were draining from the sky, leaving behind a cold, inky night loaded with stars. Night was always the best time to be on the move, whether it was a disposal operation or a raid on one of the few warehouses or stores that had anything left worth raiding. At night, you didn't have to worry about whether the ultraviolet was going to burn the skin off your back or make you go blind or cook your brains or fry your sperm. Didn't have to take your chances bundled in a hundred layers of clothes and sunscreen coating your body like axle grease.

I was packing a .357 Magnum and a pocket full of hollow-nosed bullets. There was a funny story behind that gun. Found it beneath a crucifix on the altar of a burned-out Catholic church in Manchester, New Hampshire, when we were making our way north from Boston. What it was doing there, who had left it, we never did figure out. Perhaps the good father gave his final sermon, then put it to his head and squeezed off a round. We didn't find a body, but maybe one of his parishioners had dragged it away for burial when that Mass was over.

Pete was carrying a shotgun, one of the pumper-action Ted Williams models we'd scavenged out of a Sears Roebuck store somewhere along the line.

We had only about a hundred shells of buckshot left, but Mather had insisted we take every last one of them. He'd been trying to soft-pedal his gut feelings, but you could see he was deeply concerned. The fact that he ordered us to take those shells was proof enough of that. Truth was, his feelings were telling him that these roamers were going to be unusual. That disposing of them might be a greater logistical problem than we'd had to deal with in a long, long time, maybe ever.

That night, Tony and Mather stayed behind with the women and Eric, eleven months old, our only offspring. We had five women at the time, and three of them were with child. Mather was very stubborn when it came to the women, what they could do and not do. We'd had half a dozen pregnancies already, and all but one had ended in miscarriage. Mather said we couldn't afford to take any more chances. We had to have more children if his grand scheme was ever to be realized. That was this year's motto, More Children. He was ready to do anything it took to make sure he got them.

Mather was correct on the offspring issue, of course. He'd been correct on every issue since he took charge two years ago when the sky blew off, the crops started wilting, and the world's population started dying by the hundreds of millions.

It was summer, the summer of my twenty-seventh year, and it had been the most glorious summer of my life.

We were living in New York, then, all of us, living in style and with more than our fair share of creature comforts in an upper West Side neighborhood that only recently had been gentrified. We were the brie-chablis crowd, the folks with the MBA's and the designer bathrooms who spent weekends on Cape Cod and February vacations in Aspen. There wasn't a one of us who wasn't making fifty grand then, minimum, not a one of us who wasn't employed with one of Wall Street's or Madison Avenue's most reputable firms.

Was it the Soviets, us, or some third party?

I don't know if anyone anywhere ever really learned the answer to that question, not at the beginning, when the only effects were those amazing technicolor sunsets and that crazy shift in the jet-stream, or, later on, when political institutions and economies were disintegrating faster than global temperatures and the seas were rising.

In the early days, when the presses still ran and the six o'clock

news was still being broadcast, there was all sorts of talk that it had been the test of some new thermonuclear weapon—more frightening and more secret than the Bomb, which had every true-blooded Yuppie doing flips back then.

I have to believe the guy upstairs has a pretty mean streak of irony because that wasn't it by a long shot. There was no big bang, no escalation of crisis, no state of alert, no Warsaw Pact troops marching across Germany, no Colonel Khadafy dropping a surprise on Israel—just a sky the color of fresh blood the evening of July twenty-sixth.

Maybe it was the test of a new killer technology related to the so-called Star Wars program that the late President Reagan had announced a decade before. Maybe it was the test of something the Soviets had up their sleeves that our intelligence never picked up.

Maybe the Martians landed in a Kansas cornfield and decided to zap ninety-five percent of the human race, just for kicks.

Whatever it was, it silently and quickly burned off half the upper atmosphere, leaving plants to die, food chains to be disrupted and destroyed.

We didn't know how bad it had really been until it turned winter, and winter brought no dirty snow on Fifth Avenue, no frost on Macy's windows, no skating in Central Park, no temperatures lower than the sixties, not even in January or February.

By spring, the hospitals and doctors were overloaded with skin cancer cases and people whose vision was fading away to darkness.

By summer, the effects of the failed wheat and corn crops were filtering down, and grocery stores experienced their first shortages.

By fall, there was rioting and looting, and the cities began to burn. Police and the National Guard controlled some of it, at first, but then the panic set in. When it did, the authorities put down their weapons and ran.

By the next winter, starvation was coast-to-coast and the typhus had gone wild.

It was, of course, Mather's idea to leave New York. Right from the start, everything had been Mather's idea. We got out of the city in June, before the real panic hit, and we headed up the Connecticut coast. There was still gas left, although there were shortages and growing lines at the stations, so we drove, charging up a storm on our American Express and Visa cards as we went.

Mostly, we traveled by night, holing up during the daylight hours in cheap motels. When we did have to go outside, no matter how briefly, Mather made sure we wore sunglasses and painted our-

selves with sunscreen, protection factor fifteen. Eventually there was a run on sunscreen and finally supplies dried up, but Mather had been smart enough to buy cases of it before John Q. Public fully realized what was going on. He'd done the same thing with penicillin and guns, so we were okay on those fronts, too.

We were in Boston when the fabric of American society began to dissolve, slowly but completely, like a cube of sugar in water. It was September, the hottest September ever recorded by the National Weather Service, and no one any longer had any doubt what was happening.

Mather had decided to put down roots, at least until we could figure out what the long-term plan would be. After disposing of a gang of winos, we'd made our home in an abandoned subway tunnel near Park Street Station, which is almost directly under City Hall. From a defensive perspective, the tunnel was a dream—only one entrance, which we kept clear with occasional firefights. From the survival point of view, it gave us decent access to stores and warehouses, particularly those mammoth ones along the waterfront, which were still stocked weeks after everything else ran out. The day the looting began in earnest, we grabbed enough canned juices and beef stew and hams for at least a year, according to Mather's calculations.

It was a sickening scene we found when the Great Fire finally forced us to the surface. Bodies strewn everywhere, smoldering or just plain rotting, every one of them guaranteed to be harboring enough disease to wipe us out a thousand times over. Immediately Mather decided to head north, where, he said, we would have the best chance of establishing a camp. We passed other bands as we walked, and we had some skirmishes, losing two of our original group in the process.

Now the big threat was roamers.

Why they didn't establish camps like the rest of us was a mystery not even Mather pretended to be able to solve. His best guess was that it had something to do with intelligence, or lack thereof, and I imagine he was right. You needed brains to build a camp, defend it, find a way to eat—in our case, a small but successful fish hatchery, supplemented by freeze-dried and canned stuff we'd managed to hoard. It took brains to beat the sun, escape the heat, and it took brains to keep the germs at bay.

From where roamers stood, it was plain easier to loot, pillage, whatever it took.

Which made every camp a target.

Pete followed me down the hill.

Neither of us spoke—I guess there wasn't much of anything to say. The moon was three-quarters full and between that and the usual stunning array of stars we had no trouble keeping up a good clip. I wanted to get in and out quickly; I had some business back with Lisa, who'd been my girlfriend in the West Side days, and who Mather had decided was still an acceptable mate for me. He hadn't assigned Pete a woman, but he had occasional privileges, which he was always pleased to exercise.

They were eerie, the nights since the sky blew off.

Sound seemed to carry twenty times farther than it had before. Noises were louder, exaggerated. A few nocturnal animals still survived, owls and raccoons among them, and their voices seemed to come from a hundred directions at once, or no direction at all. It was like Mother Nature had gone ventriloquist. Crickets, which had done quite well, put out sound like steady radio static.

But it wasn't only noise that made the nights strange —temperatures had been thrown all out of whack, too. Most nights, like tonight, you were lucky if the mercury dipped into the nineties. The only relief was an occasional evening breeze.

A mile from our camp, we entered the outskirts of Bradford Village. If you closed your eyes, you could picture it as it might have been before the sky blew off: a charmed little blue-collar village, where neighbor knew neighbor and treated him with proper Yankee respect, a place where the machinery of life hummed quietly along in a more or less well-greased fashion. You could imagine being born in that village, growing up there, raising a family, walking your children down the aisle, bouncing your grandchildren on your knee, going to your grave a reasonably satisfied man.

Some had been torched and some had self-combusted, but most of the houses still stood—a curious mixture of white Colonials and shingled Capes and ticko-tacko pre-fab ranches that had been all the rage during the prosperous, inflationless fifties. There was no glass in any of the windows now. And the paint was peeling, the front walks and sidewalks cracked and crumbling. And the cars that were parked in the driveways were beginning to rust. Every tire was flat, and roamers had busted the windshields. The trees that once had shaded back yard barbecues now were blighted, their leafless branches waving in the wind like the thin fingers of a skeleton.

You could go on and on, but it only made you sick.

On the other side of Bradford, we smelled it: the unmistakable aroma of a campfire. It was coming from across the Quannapowitt River, and as we got closer, we could see flickering shapes. They were just beyond the bank of the river, roughly three hundred yards away, a band of people huddled in a circle on flat ground next to a burned out but still standing barn. We couldn't make out the faces, but it looked as if there were a dozen of them, no more.

I was relieved. Unless some of their number were off somewhere in the shadows, this was going to be a milk run. It looked as if Mather's fears might turn out to be pointless.

I pulled Pete close to me and whispered: "Piece of cake."

"Why's that?" he asked.

"Because of that barn."

"What good's the barn?"

"Barn's got a loft."

"What good's the loft?"

"Gives us a clear view of the entire camp. We ought to be able to finish the operation from a sitting position."

Pete started to say something, but I motioned him quiet. From there on in, stealth was going to be important. Spook them now, and they might attack—or worse, scatter. We'd have a devil of a time tracking them down, and some would probably slip away, and then there'd be hell to pay with Mather. I didn't need that just then, and I imagined Pete didn't, either.

You didn't need a historian to see that the Quannapowitt in the old days had been a healthy, full-fledged river—upstream a mile you could see the remains of a dozen mills. Since the sky blew off, the Quannapowitt had shrunk to a trickle, six inches deep at its deepest with no more power to drive a loom than water from a faucet. We waded across. The river wasn't cool, no rivers were any more, but it still felt refreshing around the ankles.

Getting to the barn was easy: Crouching low, we simply followed a waist-high stone wall that ran up to it from the river. We let ourselves in a back door, then climbed on cat's feet into the loft.

I wasn't prepared for what we saw when we looked down.

What I was prepared for, I suppose, was the usual band of roamers: a group of men and women, middle-aged or younger, with one kid, possibly two. That was the description of all the bands we'd seen, and it made sense they were like that. Sun and disease had taken their toll, a toll few of the very young or very old were able to pay.

There were no grown men in this group—no able-bodied grown

men, that is, only a wizened old character who looked to be eighty or more sitting closest to the fire. Close to him were the women: six in number, twenties and thirties in age. They were sitting, too. Huddled at their feet in the dirt were a half dozen children, most younger than the kid who'd made it to our perimeter.

If the empty cans were any clue, they'd recently finished dinner, but there hadn't been much to eat. Now not much was happening. When they spoke, it was in low voices we couldn't catch. I could make out only two faces from the shadows—the old man's and one of the women's. Except for the wrinkles, they wore identical expressions: that peculiar hybrid of fright and exhaustion and malnutrition I'd seen on roamers before.

Something else, too, a look I'd never seen on roamers. I hesitate to call it innocence.

Mather later theorized that they had been in hiding somewhere, and had recently been forced out somehow—maybe when their food ran low, maybe at the hands of some belligerent roamers. He was pretty sure there had been more men with them originally. He imagined they'd been killed, but there was no way of knowing.

At the moment, the origin of the roamers wasn't the issue. The point was Pete's reaction.

"I can't do it, Russ," he whispered. "There's been too much already."

I looked at him, his profile expanding and shrinking in the campfire's glow. I looked at him long and hard, but I can't say that I was surprised. Mather and I had had a private talk about him just before leaving.

"Don't stare at me like that," he said, "like I'm a criminal. I've been thinking about it for weeks. Mather's crazy on this. Paranoid. Can't you see it? There's no need for this, Russ. No need."

"What do you suggest then?" I said calmly. Below us, an infant started to cry. The night took that cry, twisted and deformed it, made it ghost-like and disembodied. Both of us were silent for a moment.

"What's your idea?" I repeated.

"That we button up and go back home. Forget them."

"And what about when Mather sees smoke tomorrow morning?"

"There wouldn't have to be any smoke," he said after a moment.

"We could tell them to move on. They could be over the border in New York State by daybreak. It can be our little secret, Russ. You and me. Mather need never know."

It went on like that for maybe ten minutes, back and forth, back and forth.

Finally, I gave in.

"You win," I said.

"You don't mean it."

"I do," I whispered. "Now, listen. It's your idea. Why don't you be the one to tell them."

"Thanks," he said. "Really, thanks. And, listen: Mather will never know."

Pete started for the stairs. "Don't you think you ought to leave your shotgun here?" I asked. "Wouldn't want to create the wrong impression."

"Sure. Right." He handed his weapon to me and headed down the loft.

"Any hesitation," Mather had said during our private chat, "and you have my full and complete authorization."

I waited until Pete had reached the campfire. Then I shot him through the back. The noise was startling, but before anyone down there could react much, I emptied the shotgun in their direction eight times. In fifteen seconds, it was over. On my way out of the barn, I was lucky—I found a five-gallon can of gas, and it was full. I poured the gas over the bodies, stepped back, and tossed a coal from the campfire. It went up with a roar.

Standing at a safe distance, I lit up a cigarette. We were running low on tobacco, but this was one of those times that called for a smoke. I suddenly had an old fashioned thirst for an ice-cold beer, but there wasn't any beer any more. What there was was hooch, which Mather had discovered you could make from canned peaches, dandelions, anything that had sugar in it, even bark from certain trees. It wasn't the smoothest stuff, but you could still get a decent buzz from it. I'd have a glass when I got home.

Whistling some old top-forty tune, I headed back. Mather would be pleased with the outcome of the operation. In the distance, the fire lit up the night. It would die down when it reached the river. A gentle late-night breeze was blowing up. As I walked, it began to dry the thin sweat that was covering my forehead.

Patchwork

by Janet O'Daniel



The village had stood there since before the Articles of Confederation were signed. It was busy and thriving before the Continentals made their stand on Breed's Hill. It had hummed with life

Illustration by Barbara Roman

long before John Adams began writing to Abigail from far-off places—those measured letters of love and domestic concern. ("Pray how does your asparagus perform?") In such a venerable town, it was not to be

expected that twentieth century conventions would be entirely respected. Street corners did not meet at right angles, houses were surprisingly close to the sidewalks. Shops and dwellings alike could be hazards for those who were not natives. Floors dipped, steps wavered. Odd levels and corners abounded.

Wickedness, of course, thrived there as anywhere.

The building that was to become The Patchworks stood on Main Street on a corner—or what would have been a corner except that it was really a curve. It was where the road had bent to trail off in a westerly direction once, long ago. Cows being driven to outlying pastures after the morning milking had perhaps preferred it that way. And because it was on a curve, the shop's front stoop was rounded, as were its stone steps.

"I could be happy there," Dorcas said the moment she saw it. Richard, holding her hand, looking at her, knew she was telling the truth; knew too that he would be happy if Dorcas was.

"It's not a long drive into the city," he said reasonably.

"And the station's close, in case you don't want to drive."

"We'll have to see what sort of shape it's in."

"But it looks just right for my shop. And we could live up overhead."

"Sort of run down, isn't it?"

"We can fix it up."

"Oh sure. Anything can be fixed."

Thus, trying to sound reasonable and pragmatic, but with their minds already made up, they approached the corner, mounted the rounded steps, and pushed the door open. The sign over the door said **SMOKES—NEWSPAPERS—SOFT DRINKS**. A bell jangled as they entered.

"We could keep the bell," Richard said hesitantly as he looked around.

They kept the bell, but that was all. By the time Dorcas's shop opened for business in September, all else had been swept, hauled, or carted away. Splintery counters, cracked mirrors mended with electrician's tape, scarred shelves that had held Fritos and potato chips, shabby racks that had held newspapers. Cork ceiling tiles were removed to reveal foot-thick beams; mullioned front windows were re-glazed and put-tied.

SMOKES—NEWSPAPERS—SOFT DRINKS came down. In its place, gently swaying, hung Dorcas's new sign: **THE PATCHWORKS. QUILTING SUPPLIES. SUNDRIES.**

"Don't you love *Sundries*?" she asked Richard, and Richard, who loved Dorcas, said he did.

It was a time everywhere of restoration, rediscovery, revival. And timing, it has often been noted, is all. Dorcas's shop opened on a tide of nostalgia, of appreciation for things past. While antique shops sold washboards for twenty-five dollars, Depression milk bottles for ten, Dorcas sold quilts she had made, quilts she had collected, and on the other side of the shop sold, yard by colorful yard, the materials with which to make quilts. However, many of her customers had more will than skill.

"I don't get it," one woman frowned. "I mean—how do you put all those little pieces together? I'd love to do it. It would be—I don't know—a statement of my own. Made to the world, you know? Only I don't know how."

Dorcas, who thought that in itself something of a statement, wisely did not say so. "I'm sure you could learn," she said kindly.

"But how did *you* learn?"

Dorcas sought back in memory and knew that she had taught herself. Her own fingers and feeling had taught her. There had never been a time when she had not felt comfortable with a needle in her hand

and scraps littered around her.

"I suppose I just picked it up," she said. Then an idea came to her. "Perhaps I could teach you—and some of the others who'd like to learn."

"A class."

"Yes, a class." Trying it out in her mind, Dorcas decided she liked the idea. But she and Richard were property owners now. They had a Mortgage.

"There would be a fee, of course," she added primly.

The classes were a great success and good for business. Dorcas held them in the late afternoons in one corner of the shop, keeping an eye on the counter and taking care of occasional customers at the same time. But many women—and one man who inquired rather shyly—worked at their jobs by day and wanted to attend an evening class. Would she consider it?

"Well, possibly," Dorcas said, but she was thinking of Richard and their time together in the low-ceilinged rooms upstairs. "I'll think about it."

Then one day before she had made up her mind, a woman came into the shop carrying an armful of folded quilts. Dorcas thought she was not yet forty, yet she had a gaunt, weary look. Something older than forty was in her eyes. Some wisdom, it seemed to Dorcas, or perhaps

only knowledge, which is of course useful, but less than wisdom. The two of them looked at each other and seemed, in that first moment, to see something, each in the other. The thing had a name, but neither of them called it anything as yet. The name was understanding. They understood each other but did not know that they did.

"I have been noticing your sign," the woman said.

Dorcas's eyes flickered toward what the woman was carrying. "You make quilts?" she asked.

"It's something I've always done," the woman said, minimizing it.

"And you'd like to sell them?"

Now Dorcas was filled with dread, for she had met a number of these earnest needle-women since opening her shop. For the most part their creations were dreadful shiny affairs, with a great deal of polyester in shades of orange, lime green, fuschia. Skillful fingers but no eye for color, design, balance, proportion. Once or twice she had, spinelessly, agreed to take them on consignment, and had felt wretched over her lack of backbone. I will *not* take these if they're ugly, she told herself. I will *not*.

"I would like to sell them, yes, ma'am," the woman said.

Dorcas, feeling serious and

mature at being called ma'am, cleared a space on the counter. "Well. Let's have a look." The feeling—still with no name—was working in her, and stronger now. She began to think the things might not be ugly after all.

The woman placed them on the counter and unfolded the top one for Dorcas to see.

It was in the pattern called Bear Paw and was made in shades of soft rose and beige, with dark red at the center of each block. Neither of them said anything. The woman put it aside and unfolded the next one. This was done in dozens of colors but so skillfully assembled that not a single piece clashed with any other. The blocks were separated by strips of midnight blue that made the quilt look like a stained-glass window. Dorcas recognized the pattern.

"That's the Monkey Wrench, isn't it?"

"Yes ma'am. I always thought it a poor name. No real sound to it. But when you set this pattern kitterin', you call it the Anchor. I like that better."

"Kitterin'?" Dorcas echoed.

"On the slant, like."

"Oh yes, diagonally—"

The woman unfolded the next one. Stars in shades of blue set against white. "This here they call the Lemon Star."

Dorcas recognized the Lemon Star, but she rather liked the sound of Lemon. She studied the tiny stitches, the smooth seams, the corners that met without a pucker.

"Your work is very good, Mrs.—"

"Lillian Shaw."

"Mrs. Shaw. It's very good indeed. I'll be happy to take them on consignment. How much do you want to ask for them?"

"You decide, ma'am. Anything you get is all right with me."

Dorcas saw Lillian Shaw's look move to the bolts of cloth standing upright in rows on the shelves behind the counter.

"Do you need more material?" she asked.

"Oh no, ma'am. No. Maybe if any of these sell, I might buy some."

"I could let you have some and deduct it later from the money you'll have coming."

"If the quilts don't sell, it'd be a debt."

"I'm sure they'll sell." Dorcas was already thinking of a dealer in antiques and crafts who would handle something this fine. She could sell him the lot, she was sure. "You should look on it as a business investment."

"Well—if you're sure it's all right."

She chose a soft green that Dorcas herself loved, a pale

shade with darker green designs of ferns and feathery growing things. With it she placed a strawberry pink. Exactly right, Dorcas thought. The colors of spring and growth. She watched Lillian Shaw's hands move over the bolts of cloth as though making their selection partly by touch, loving the smoothness and feeling the quilt already made.

"What pattern will you choose for this one?"

"Tree of Life," Lillian Shaw replied without hesitation. In her head it was already made, Dorcas thought. The two of them looked at each other again, and it seemed to Dorcas that with each look she knew something more about the woman. She knew right now, for instance, that it was important to Lillian to take this material home with her—the pale green, the young glowing pink. That she needed it. Because Lillian sewed her quilts for the same reason women of an earlier time must have sewn theirs in the long howling winters, in the cold lonely cabins. To keep from going mad.

"**S**he's a real artist," Dorcas told Richard that night. "Only very poor, I could tell."

The two of them, so rich in

blessings, considered this.

"Artists often are," Richard ventured.

"And not happy."

"You could tell that, too?"

"Yes." Then Dorcas mentioned the evening class that had been suggested. It gave Richard a chill, thinking of lonely evenings without Dorcas.

"Maybe you could get this woman to teach it," he said.

Dorcas had been giving this some thought herself.

"What a good idea, Richard," she said, and put her white arms around him in the darkness.

"Two evenings a week, say. Perhaps two hours each time. And you'd be paid," Dorcas said. "We'd charge a fee."

Lillian Shaw, who had come into the shop for thread, considered it. "Could I, do you think?"

"Of course. Just show people how you do it yourself. How to measure and cut, that sort of thing."

"Can I let you know?" Lillian said. "I'll have to—" She did not finish saying what she had to do, but Dorcas thought she knew. There was someone she had to ask.

"Yes, of course," Dorcas said. Then she added, "Do you live far? Would it be hard for you to come in, evenings?" It was win-

ter now, and dark early.

"I live out on the Spoon Hollow Road," Lillian said. "But my boy could probably bring me."

It was the most she had revealed about herself. She had a home which could be located; she had a son old enough to drive.

"Fine," Dorcas said. "You can let me know."

Two days later Lillian came in and said she would give it a try.

The small group of students overflowed with enthusiasm. Lillian got on well with them. She began to smile now and then. The money was not much, but it seemed to satisfy her. Dorcas augmented it by giving her material for sewing. Twice a week in the early evening Lillian was brought to the shop by a boy in a rusty pickup truck. The boy had straight light hair which fell across his forehead, and he wore a plaid lumber jacket but no hat or gloves. Dorcas, watching through the window, could see the redness of his hands, the bony raw look of his wrists. She saw too that each time he left Lillian he waited until she was inside the door of the shop before leaving. His eyes followed her with a look of concern until she turned and gave him a little

wave before going inside. He was always there to pick her up two hours later.

"His name is Edward," Lillian explained.

"He seems a fine boy," Dorcas said. Lillian looked pleased.

"He wants to join the Marines."

"Oh?"

"He wants to get on. You know, learn things. The Marines, they teach you things."

"When will he go?"

Lillian looked troubled. "I don't know. I want him to go now, but he says no, not yet. He worries—" She broke off and did not finish.

Then one night it was not Edward who came for her but a man, a large man whose massive shoulders filled the doorway, whose head almost touched the bell when he stood up straight. He wore a checked flannel shirt and a down vest over it. His eyes were narrow and cold as he looked around the shop—at the colors ranged on the shelves and spilling over the big cutting table, at the group of learners in their sewing corner. Their voices stilled one by one as they felt the draft from the door and turned. Dorcas, who had come downstairs for a spool of thread to match a shirt she was mending for Richard, paused with the spool in her hand. The man swayed

very slightly. A smell of drinking had come into the shop with him. His jaw was set. Like a rock, Dorcas thought.

Lillian, who was leaning over Mrs. Rodman's shoulder, pointing to a corner that was not quite true, was the last to notice. When she straightened and turned toward the door she went white and, without a word, walked to the corner where her worn brown coat had been tossed over a chair.

"I must go," she said. They were the only words she spoke as she pulled on her coat and her knitted hat and went out the door with the man. He had left the door open all the time he waited for her, and the shop was cold now. Dorcas, still clutching the spool of thread, swallowed and turned to the students.

"I believe that will be all for this evening," she said.

She too was white by the time she returned to Richard upstairs.

"But what are you afraid of?" he kept asking after she had told him about it. "What is it?"

Dorcas only shook her head and pressed herself closer in his arms, shivering.

Two days later Lillian came to the shop again, but in the daytime. She had walked, Dorcas guessed by the look of her,

for her knitted hat was pulled down over her forehead and her scarf wrapped her almost up to her eyes. Dorcas fluttered around her and said, "Lillian, you look frozen. Come sit down. Take your things off, and I'll make you a cup of tea."

"I don't need anything," Lillian said, and as she unwrapped herself slowly Dorcas could see the swelling around her eyes, the bruises over her cheekbones, the split upper lip. And Dorcas, who had very little experience in such matters, whose life had been painted with a palette of soft colors, began to tremble.

"Are you all right, Lillian?" And then, even though she knew, "What happened to you?"

"I won't be able to teach the class any more," Lillian said. "My husband doesn't like me to be out at night."

"But surely—" Dorcas began, and saw Lillian close her eyes slowly, as if against some pain too great to be looked at. "But you can still come in the daytime. You'll be needing material now and then, and if I sell those quilts of yours you may want to bring me more. If you have more, that is—"

Lillian's eyes came open, but slowly, as if Dorcas's determined optimism wearied her. "Oh yes," she said. "I have more."

"Well then—if you want to part with them, that is—"

"Part with them?" Bitterness crept in now. "Oh yes, I'd part with them all right."

"Well then, you see? We will be seeing each other." Dorcas, recognizing what was in the other woman's eyes, still could not help painting with her own set of colors, trying to brush in pale rose, sunny yellow. "It'll be all right, Lillian, you'll see."

Richard was horrified when she told him the story, although he tried to hide it and appear worldly. But he kept seeing it as Dorcas, her soft flesh bruised, her lovely face swollen.

"What the devil would make a man do a thing like that?" he said angrily. "He knew she was coming here, didn't he?"

"Yes of course. She told me she had to ask him." Dorcas paused. "No she didn't. She said, *I'll have to*—" Have to what? "I thought she meant she had to ask her husband. But maybe what she meant was she'd have to see if she could do it without his finding out." She looked at Richard. "And he did find out."

Business stayed brisk in Dorcas's shop. Winter wore away. March blew in on a wild wind, bringing with it one last snowfall, heavy and wet, that broke limbs

and knocked out power for a time. Dorcas and Richard lit candles and sat close together by the fire. Rain followed the snow and brown bare spots appeared on the hills around the village. There were freezing nights still, but during the sunny daylight hours there was thawing. Dorcas put on her boots and walked around the small back yard behind the shop, seeing raccoon tracks, like those of little human hands and feet, rambling about in the snow that remained. There were skunk tracks too, stodgy and less wandery.

Lillian Shaw did not return to the shop.

The dealer who had taken Lillian's quilts sold them. He sent Dorcas a check. Dorcas wondered about sending the money to Lillian. She kept seeing the man with the stony jaw and the way his cold eyes had moved around the shop. She decided to wait. She made a note of the amount—*owed to Lillian Shaw*, she wrote—and put it under the drawer in the cash register. When the dealer called and asked, "Any more where those came from?" Dorcas said she would let him know.

The wind began to lose its sharp bite. The birches showed yellow-green buds. Crows left the woods out beyond the village to feed in the bare spots,

then gathered to talk it over noisily in the pine trees. Mud was everywhere. Signs of spring appeared daily, although people meeting on the street told each other as they did every year that it certainly was uncommonly late.

Then on a Sunday in April, with jonquils poking up through last year's matted leaves, the sheriff's car went tearing through the village with a look of urgency. Richard walked out to buy the Sunday papers and learned that a man named Reuben Shaw had been found dead at the foot of the cellar steps in the old farmhouse he and his family lived in out on the Spoon Hollow Road. His wife had been in the field behind the house gathering early dandelion greens. She had come home and found him. Her basket, with greens scattered all around, was beside the body.

Later word had it that the sheriff had investigated and had confirmed that Reuben Shaw had died of a deep head wound. The sheriff pointed out a jutting stone shelf built into the foundation of the house—such things were used in the old days for storage. No doubt the man had hit his head on it as he fell. A bit of blood was found on it. It had been thought at first that the victim might have encountered house-

breakers; there had been such trouble out that way recently. In which case, the sheriff theorized, he might have been struck over the head first, thrown down the steps afterward. Unlikely, the sheriff said, refuting his own argument. Shaw was a heavy man, and strong. Not the likely work of two hurrying burglars. And in broad daylight? No, accidental was the way he saw it. *Accidental*, he entered in his report. Shaw was known as a heavy drinker. Smelled of it when they found him.

Then on a day in May Lillian Shaw appeared at the shop with her son Edward. The boy was carrying an armload of quilts, randomly stacked.

"Lillian! I'm so glad to see you!" Dorcas cried out, but then paused because Lillian looked in some way different to her. Subdued, withdrawn. Not unhappy, not troubled. Quiet, rather, and serene.

"You said you could use more of these," Lillian said.

"Yes, of course. Oh, I have missed you, Lillian," Dorcas could not help saying. She turned to the boy. "Hello, Edward." He looked different in the warm May air. The sleeves of his blue denim shirt were rolled up, his hair was ruffled by the breeze. He smiled in his quiet way and placed the pile

of quilts on the counter.

"And I have money for you, too. From the others you left with me." Dorcas hurried to write a check and hand it to her. Lillian stared at it, holding it carefully. "Thank you," she said quietly. Then she added, "Edward's leaving tomorrow."

"Oh?"

"For the Marines. He's been wanting to."

"I know—you said. Good luck, Edward. And Lillian, you must stop in again now that you'll be—by yourself. You will, won't you?"

The corners of Lillian's mouth went up slightly. A wisp of a smile, no more. She dipped her head a little to acknowledge the invitation. A sort of thanks. Perhaps, she indicated, but did not say. Dorcas did not press it. Then Lillian looked at her. A meeting of eyes. And there was the thing between them again, each seeing it in the other. Understanding. With a shock of realization Dorcas knew that Lillian Shaw would do whatever she chose to do now. Strength glittered around her like a medium's aura, striking life into her dull hair, squaring her tired shoulders. Dorcas swallowed as a slow, freezing chill seemed to start up in her, shivering its way from deep inside to surface along her arms where the small hairs rose.

"Will you be wanting material to take home with you today?" she asked, but only for something to say because already she knew the answer.

"No," Lillian said quietly. "I don't need anything."

That night she and Richard sorted out the quilts upstairs. Dorcas arranged and rearranged them until she thought she had the order right.

"This one's first, of course," she said. "It's called the Double Wedding Ring."

"Yes. And then this one?"

"That's called Sawtooth."

"Why is that next?"

"Oh—realization, sharp edges, pain."

"I suppose. Then what?"

"World Without End. That's this one here."

"Hopeless, you mean—"

"Yes. But then, you see, here's Flying Geese."

"I don't get that."

"Dreams, I think. She must have dreamed."

"How about that next one?"

"That's called Drunkard's Path."

"Self-explanatory," Richard said.

"And this one's called Storm at Sea."

"Storm at sea?"

"Well, mostly the storm part.

Terrible turbulence. Indecision."

"And this one's last?"

"Yes." Dorcas unfolded the Tree of Life. It lay before them, spread over her knees, the growing green and vibrant pink, the little trees made of green triangles, all fashioned with thousands of determined tiny stitches, all reaching, stretching as if toward the sun.

"It's Edward," Dorcas whispered. "It's her love for him. That's what this one is. It's his chance."

Richard said slowly, "Do you think—I mean, could they possibly, the two of them—"

But Dorcas had stood up suddenly. The Tree of Life fell from her lap, and she leaned over to pick it up. Began folding it with short choppy gestures. Her mouth was thin-drawn, a severe line Richard had not seen before.

"You heard what the sheriff said." It was a sharp, hard voice, new to Richard. "That's all I know. All I want to know."

Richard, feeling that he was in the presence of some awesome woman-knowledge, some secret freemasonry that excluded him, decided nervously that he wouldn't bring it up again.

Case #5423: The Second Fire

by Stephanie Kay Bendel



On Monday, July 23, at eleven thirty-seven P.M., in the Chelsea district of Boston, Number 17 Porter Street exploded. Within seconds, flames shot through the roof and part of the north wall.

Between the official reports and the initial statements of

Illustration by Ronald Chironna

the survivors and witnesses, Inspector Blaine Kesey of the Arson Squad had no trouble constructing a mental picture of the events just prior to the blast.

Number 17 was a three decker in a lower-middleclass neighborhood. On the first floor lived the owners and landlords, Mr.

and Mrs. Edward Werner, a couple in their sixties. Mrs. Werner had gone to bed about a half hour earlier and was sleeping soundly when the blast occurred. Mr. Werner had been sitting in the living room in his undershirt, drinking beer and watching Johnny Carson on television.

On the second floor lived Mrs. Leona Silver, a middle-aged widow and her fourteen-year-old son, Peter. Mrs. Silver, too, had been sleeping at the time of the blast. Peter had gone down to the basement where each of the tenants had a storage area. He'd been looking for a chemistry set he'd gotten the Christmas before.

The third floor was occupied officially by Cranston Howard, 37, and unofficially by his nineteen-year-old girlfriend, Brenda Vine, and their infant son, Joshua. The baby had been sleeping in his crib in the living room. Brenda and Cranston had been in the kitchen, arguing.

Next door, at Number 15, eighty-year-old Alfred Mehan was dying. Father Gerald Thomas had just finished hearing his confession.

And on the sidewalk approaching Number 17, Frank Olson, a retired dock worker, was walking his aged springer spaniel, Sadie. Immediately after the blast, Olson ran to the

front of the house. Peering through the pane of glass in the door, he saw flames shooting up the staircase. Fearing that opening the door would only fan the fire, he ran around to the side of the house where he heard screams.

A birdlike gray-haired woman in an old fashioned nightgown leaned out of a second story window. "Peter!" she cried. "My boy! I can't find him!"

"Jump!" Olson pleaded. "I'll catch you."

She shook her head. "I've got to find him!" And she disappeared back into the house.

A young woman called from a third floor window. She held a blanketed bundle. "Please!" she called to Olson. "Catch my baby!" Olson had barely time to nod when she dropped the bundle down to him. His heart in his throat, the man caught the child who, after a startled silence, began to cry. Olson laid the baby on a small patch of grass well away from the burning house. His dog licked the child's face. The man returned to the side of the house. He wondered whether anyone had called the fire department.

"And now you!" he called to the young woman. "Jump!" He held out his arms.

Brenda Vine clambered onto the sill and teetered a moment. Olson saw with misgivings that

she was a large, sturdily built girl. He himself was sixty-three, and though he was in good shape for his age, he knew he was not going to be able to break her fall completely.

He saw her arms and legs outflung as she hurtled down at him. He braced himself. The impact knocked him down. As he got up, he stared at Brenda's legs, twisted outward at horrible angles, fragments of bone protruding from the flesh. "Oh, my God!" he murmured.

He grabbed Brenda under the arms and tried to pull her away from the burning building. She screamed with the movement and Olson, tears in his eyes, said over and over, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Several things seemed to happen at once now. From somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed. Above, in the window from which the girl had jumped, Cranston Howard appeared, his arms full of bedsheets. From the back of the house, Edward Werner staggered forward. His undershirt was smoke-stained, his face sooty. "My wife!" he panted. "Olive! I can't get her out!"

Olson left the moaning girl and ran toward Werner. "Where?" The soot-covered man motioned toward the back door. Smoke and flames poured out. Olson pulled the man back.

"You can't go in there. I'm sorry." He recoiled at the look of realization in Werner's face. Olson tried to comfort him. "The firemen are nearly here. Hear the sirens? They have masks and special suits. They can get in. Maybe it isn't too late."

Werner started to cry.

By this time Cranston Howard had lowered himself out the window using the bedsheets. He was shouting to Mrs. Silver, who had reappeared. He tried to tell her to go into the next room, from the window of which she could reach his bedsheets and lower herself to the ground. The tiny woman didn't hear him. "Please help me! My boy! I can't find him!"

"Stay by the window!" Howard shouted. "Don't go back into the smoke! I'll see if I can get in another way!" He ran to the front of the house.

Olson, still trying to pull Edward Werner away from the back of the house, now saw Mrs. Silver but not the bedsheets. "Jump!" he called. "We'll catch you!"

Werner seemed to come out of his daze. "Yeah, Mrs. Silver, Jump!"

The woman shrank and shook her head. Werner continued to plead with her. Olson thought he heard the fire engine coming up the street. He turned to look and found himself facing a

priest. The cleric was a slightly built man in his middle fifties. He had thinning gray hair and wore metal-rimmed glasses. Olson motioned toward Brenda Vine, who had painfully inched her way to her baby's side and was attempting to comfort the child. "Father," Olson suggested, "maybe you could help this woman."

But the priest didn't respond. He stood trembling, eyes wide, perspiration trickling down his face, oblivious to Olson's words.

As the fire engine pulled up, Cranston Howard reappeared, carrying Peter Silver. "I pulled him out the basement window," Cranston said as he laid the frail-looking boy on the grass near Brenda. "He's hurt."

Mrs. Silver saw her son and climbed up on the sill, screaming. Now Olson begged her not to jump. "The firemen are here. They have ladders! Wait!" But Mrs. Silver would have none of it. She plunged out the window and Frank Olson caught yet another person. Fortunately, the woman weighed only ninety-eight pounds and was jumping from ten feet lower than Brenda Vine had. Peter's mother escaped unharmed.

A second engine drew up. Werner grabbed a fireman and pulled him toward the back door, gesturing and crying. Another fireman, unwinding a

hose, motioned for Father Thomas to step back. But the priest stood fast, frozen in horror. The fireman had to move him forcibly. As he did so, he heard the priest murmur, "It's just like before! Exactly like before!"

On Wednesday morning, Inspector Blaine Kesey sat at his desk and stared at the reports before him. The investigation after the fire showed that the initial blast had been caused by a crude homemade bomb with an alarm clock-controlled detonator. The bomb had been in the basement, beneath the stairs. The remnants of a five-gallon gas can had also turned up there. Kesey knew that the likelihood of being able to trace any of the materials was small.

Number 17 had had only one interior staircase. There had been the mandatory fire escape at the back of the building, but two days before the fire, it had been taken down for replacement.

The blast had blown young Peter Silver across the basement. Luckily, he hadn't lost consciousness and had managed to get to the window farthest from the flames. But he couldn't climb out. He was hampered by the lack of any-

thing sturdy to stand on and the fact that he had been badly burned. Then Howard had spotted him and pulled him out. The boy had a concussion and second degree burns over twenty percent of his body. He would recover, but there was a great deal of pain in store for him. His mother had been treated for shock and smoke inhalation and released.

Olive Werner had died in the fire. Her body had been found in the hall outside her bedroom. (The Werners apparently slept in separate rooms.) According to her husband, he had been unable to rouse her after the blast. "I shook her and yelled at the top of my lungs," the large man had sobbed. "But she wouldn't wake up! Then I tried to drag her out, but the heat and the smoke—I couldn't breathe!"

According to the reports, Mrs. Werner had weighed a good two hundred and fifty pounds. Even a man in good shape would have had trouble getting her out of a savagely burning house, Kesey reflected. And Ed Werner had gone flabby a long time ago.

But why hadn't Olive Werner awakened? The medical examiner would have to answer that one.

Brenda Vine had two badly shattered legs. The doctors said

she had a fifty-fifty chance of walking again, but she'd have a pronounced limp at best. They'd had to remove part of the bone from one leg. Her baby was unharmed, as was her boyfriend.

Kesey sighed. So where was the motive? Who in hell benefited from a nightmare like that?

He tagged his best man. "Background, McCarthy! I want everything you can find out about everyone in this case!" He paused a moment, then added, "That means the priest, too. I want to know what he meant when he said it was like before."

By late that afternoon, Kesey had learned that Ed and Olive Werner didn't get along. They'd fought often and loudly, much to the annoyance of tenants and neighbors. Furthermore, the insurance on Number 17 had recently been increased by thirty thousand dollars.

But that didn't get them much further, Kesey reflected. The building had been underinsured, and increasing the coverage had been the insurance agent's idea.

And then there was Olive Werner's overly sound sleep. It seemed fishy, but what did it prove? She might have been drugged, but why? So she wouldn't get out of the fire?

Werner might have hated her enough to kill her, but he wasn't likely to do it by blowing up a house with several other people in it, himself included. Besides, it appeared he'd made a valiant effort to save her. And his grief certainly seemed genuine.

Kesey shook his head. No, the answer wasn't there.

On his way home, Kesey paid a visit to the parish where Father Thomas lived. St. Dismas rectory was a large Victorian building. It gave the impression of being well cared for, with a minimum of money expended. The door was answered by the pastor, Monsignor Reilly. He was a tall hawk-nosed man with a fringe of white hair.

"Father Thomas isn't here. He's in the hospital."

"Oh? Is he ill?"

"Quite. But it isn't what you think. He's had a nervous breakdown, inspector." The monsignor ushered Kesey into a shabby but homey-looking study where the two men sat down.

"Does Father Thomas's—um, condition—have anything to do with the fire last Monday night?" Kesey asked.

"I'm afraid it does. He's an extremely sensitive man, you know. And fire—well, he has a phobia. Quite understandable."

"How's that?"

"When he was ten years old, his home caught fire in the middle of the night. Although he wasn't injured, his mother died. Fire has haunted him ever since. He's had quite a lot of psychiatric treatment for it, and sometimes he manages nicely. At other times, however, he suffers a great deal. Why, I've seen him say Mass in near hysteria because of the candles on the altar," Monsignor Reilly finished sadly.

Kesey frowned. "Do you know any of the details of that childhood fire?"

"Only that it took place in South Boston and that the Thomases lived on the third floor. Gerald had to jump out the window. A passerby caught him."

Before he went to the office Thursday morning, Kesey stopped at the hospital. He was told that Brenda Vine was in surgery again, so he asked for Peter Silver's room. He found the boy asleep with Mrs. Silver at his bedside. She looked tired.

When she saw him, her eyes filled with tears and she said defiantly, "It isn't true!"

"What isn't?"

"Your men seem to think Peter had something to do with the fire!"

Kesey paused. "Let's find another place to talk."

He found a private corner in the solarium and they sat down. "Tell me about it," he said.

"Two of your men were here already this morning. They kept asking me why Peter was in the basement so late at night. They acted as if he did something wrong, just going downstairs to look for his chemistry set."

"Is your son in the habit of staying up alone late at night?" Kesey asked gently.

"Oh, yes! Youngsters have so much more energy than we do, don't they? Peter never seems to need sleep. But he's a *good* boy! He stays up to read or study. He's a straight-A student, you know."

"Just why did he want his chemistry set at eleven thirty at night?"

Mrs. Silver looked wounded. "That's what your men wanted to know. Peter's studying chemistry. He's taking a summer course in it. He says he wanted to check something the book said. Why shouldn't he? What difference does it make what time it was?" She looked at Kesey squarely. "Peter's a *good* boy," she said again.

Kesey reflected that he had heard of more than one good boy who had done some pretty bad things. A fourteen-year-old straight-A student certainly had

the intelligence to put together a crude bomb and timber, hadn't he?

But where was the motive?

Back in his office, Kesey was greeted with new information.

"It's that Howard fellow, inspector," McCarthy said as Kesey took off his jacket and draped it over the back of his chair. "The guy on the third floor. It seems he was an anti-war protester in the late sixties and early seventies. He was convicted of firebombing a university chancellor's office. No one was injured and he got away with only thirty days in jail."

"What's he been doing lately?"

"He works for a consumer protection group. His politics are still a bit to the left, but as far as anyone knows, he doesn't advocate violence any more."

Interesting, Kesey thought. But why on earth would Howard blow up a building when he was on the third floor of it?

Unless the bomb went off by mistake.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and reread the article that had appeared in Tuesday's paper. The article was on page eight. There was no mention of a bomb, of course. They hadn't released that information. The paper said "undetermined origin." A small photo of Frank Olson accompanied the article.

The caption beneath it began, "Saves three." Kesey reflected that Olson looked unhappy.

The autopsy report on Mrs. Werner came in. She had taken (or was given) a moderate overdose of sedative. The medical examiner had attached a note.

I don't think it means anything, Blaine. Her doctor says she's been taking sedatives for years. A lot of people develop a tolerance for the drug and tend to take more than prescribed.

McCarthy had sent someone to the library to find the old newspaper accounts of the Thomases' fire. Kesey found a written report on his desk after lunch. The fire had occurred in June of 1941. Father Gerald Thomas's family lived on the third floor of a triple decker in Dorchester. The explosion, apparently from a leaking gas line, had knocked out the staircase wall, trapping the occupants of the upper two floors. There had been no fire escape. The blast had occurred at four thirty in the morning. A milkman who'd been making deliveries in the neighborhood had rescued all but one of the occupants of the two upper floors by catching them or breaking their falls enough to prevent injuries. The first floor tenants

had been able to escape by themselves. Mrs. Thomas had died, interestingly enough, because of heart failure, apparently triggered by the explosion. It was known that she had had previous heart problems.

The similarities were striking. Three family house. Explosion in the middle of the night, knocking out the lone staircase. A passerby catching people as they jumped from the windows. One woman dead in each case. But in 1941 there hadn't been the horrible injuries like those suffered by Brenda and Peter—unless you counted the psychic damage done to the young Gerald Thomas. So the two cases weren't quite the same.

But there were enough similarities to open a long-closed door in the recesses of Father Thomas's mind. And whoever had planted the bomb on Porter Street had claimed another victim.

Or maybe two. Late that afternoon, Kesey paid a visit to Frank Olson. McCarthy had already contacted Olson's former employer, who'd said that the man had been one of the best workers he'd ever had. Conscientious, seldom out sick. A bit of a loner, but got along with everyone. Also, according to McCarthy's report, Olson had lived at his present address for

the past fourteen years. Before that he'd spent eight years working in an electronics plant. Now he lived on Social Security and a small pension.

Kesey found Frank Olson home alone in his small apartment. The man moved awkwardly and apologized for it as he showed the inspector in. "Pulled some muscles in my back and shoulders the other night."

Olson's eyes looked as though he'd been crying, Kesey realized.

"But you'll be all right, won't you?" he asked.

Olson nodded. "Oh, yeah. A few weeks, that's all. Doctor said I'll be fine."

So what was wrong? Kesey wondered. It wasn't until he noticed the empty dog dish by the kitchen sink that he realized the old springer spaniel was nowhere to be seen.

To his question, the man said, "It happened last night. She was old and the vet said her time was coming, but you never realize. . . ."

Kesey said he was sorry. He had a dog himself and he knew what the man was feeling.

"It isn't only that," Olson went on dispiritedly. "That fire the other night—every time I close my eyes, I see the girl—her legs all smashed up. . . ."

"Don't take it personally,"

Kesey said gently. "After all, if it weren't for you, it might have been worse."

The man shook his head. "No. That's the worst part. I keep thinking that if I hadn't been there, the young fellow—the one who tied the bedsheets together—he would have gotten her out and she wouldn't have been hurt at all."

Olson's body shook with a silent sob. "A man goes on day after day," he said softly, "knowing nobody thinks much of him. But he keeps telling himself he's worth something. Then the time comes when he's got to prove it and he finds out everyone would have been better off if he hadn't been there." The man looked up at Kesey with pain in his eyes.

As he left, Kesey resolved to call Kathleen Donovan over at the senior citizen center and suggest she invite Olson to some of their activities soon. There were times when a man should not be left alone with his thoughts.

The whole damned case was full of victims.

Kesey stopped by the hospital during evening visiting hours. He found Brenda Vine still sedated but conscious. He knew that even though she'd already had extensive surgery on both

legs, she faced several more operations.

She seemed shrunken into the pillow. Her long dark hair made a limp frame for her too-pale face.

Kesey introduced himself. "Miss Vine, could you answer a few questions for me?"

She gave him the slightest of nods and stared past him. He decided to start easy. "It's been pretty rough, hasn't it?" His words sounded foolish to his ears. He tried again. "They tell me your baby's just fine. That was lucky."

"Was it?" the girl asked softly. Now her eyes focused on Kesey. Anger burned in them. "Some future he's got! A crippled mother, no father, a life on welfare. That's where he is now, you know. Social Services. A foster home! By the time I get out of here, he won't know me." Her eyes grew bright with tears.

"But Cranston," Kesey put in. "What about him? Won't he help?"

Brenda shook her head. "That's all over. It was over before this. I knew it. I kept hoping he'd change his mind because of the baby. But now—Cran would never marry a cripple."

The bitterness in her voice stung Kesey. "The two of you weren't getting along for some time, then?"

She shook her head again. "He wanted to leave us. He has another girl, you see. And Cran has never been big on responsibilities. Families aren't his style."

"This other girl—how did you find out?"

"Oh, Cran told me. He wanted me to know about her. He figured I'd just get up and leave."

"But you didn't."

"I'll say not! He's got responsibilities toward us—the baby and me. Besides, I had nowhere to go. My family threw me out. I never finished high school. So where do I go?"

Kesey nodded in understanding. "Did Cranston see a lot of the other girl?"

"More and more. He wasn't home much. In fact, the night of the fire was the first time he'd been around at night in weeks. His girl had to take a night shift." She began to cry.

Peter Silver was also awake this evening. His mother had left the hospital for a couple of hours and Kesey was glad of the opportunity to speak with the boy alone. He lay in bed with a tentlike affair covering his torso. Kesey saw that the flesh on his face, arms, and neck was dark red and blistered. His eyebrows were gone, as was part of the hair on his head.

"How are you doing?" Kesey asked as he sat down.

"Not too bad," the boy said in a half-whisper.

"Hurts to talk, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "Skin cracks."

"I have the information you gave my men earlier, so we needn't go through all that again. There are only a couple of questions more. You can nod or shake your head. Okay?"

The boy nodded.

"I understand you were by your storage compartment, about twelve feet from the stairs when the blast occurred. Right?"

He nodded.

"Did you see anyone around when you went down to the basement?"

Peter shook his head.

"Did you notice anything under the stairs when you came down?"

He shook his head again. "Dark," he whispered. "Always a lot of junk under there."

"I understand you're a good student, Peter. You study a lot, don't you?"

Peter nodded.

"Why?"

"Have to," came the whisper. "College. Need scholarship. Mom can't afford—"

Kesey formed the question carefully, but he made it sound offhand. "Peter, did you make that bomb?"

The boy looked at him with dark, clear, intelligent eyes. With an obvious effort, he raised

his voice to almost a normal level. "No, sir, I didn't."

Kesey stood up. He knew the truth when he heard it.

The next morning, McCarthy had additional information on the 1941 fire. "No question about it, inspector. It was an accident. The investigation was thorough. They found a leaky gas line."

"What set it off?"

"Apparently a spark from the water pump."

"And the survivors of the fire?"

"Mostly dead now. Father Thomas has an older sister in Florida. Their father died a couple of years ago. There was a child living on the second floor. Her parents are deceased, but she's still alive. Lives in Oregon."

"And the milkman? The guy who rescued them?"

"His name was Planter. Charlie Planter. A real loser, apparently. Usually in trouble at school, dropped out when he was sixteen. Fired from several menial jobs, quit a couple of others, was unemployed a lot. He wasn't even the regular milkman. He took the route for a friend who had to go out of town for a few days."

"And after the fire?"

"For a couple of months, he

was a hero. His picture was in the papers, he got a commendation from the mayor, a medal from the governor. The dairy even offered him a permanent job."

"Did he take it?"

"Yeah, but he didn't last long. Was fired three months later for being late on his deliveries. Went into the navy when the war broke out. He deserted eighteen months later. I couldn't trace him after that."

"Deserted, huh?" Kesey thought a bit. "There's a certain mentality," he said slowly. "I see it from time to time. You can hand some people the world on a platter and they'll accidentally-on-purpose drop it. Then they spend their lives cursing their bad luck."

McCarthy looked at his boss, puzzled.

Kesey thumbed through the papers on his desk. He found what he wanted—a sketch of Number 17 as it had looked before the fire. The sketch was accompanied by a floor plan. He studied it closely. The front door of Number 17 had opened into a foyer. To the left was the door to the Werners' living quarters. Directly ahead was the staircase leading to the upper apartments and, of course, the cellar.

He'd requested that Werner

stop by later that morning and when the man showed up, Kesey asked, "The front door—was it locked as a rule?"

Edward Werner shifted his weight in his chair, which squeaked in protest. There were bags under his eyes and his thinning hair needed washing. "The front door? No. We never locked it. The neighborhood is safe. You don't have to worry about getting mugged in the hall."

"But the individual apartments would be locked, generally?"

Werner shrugged. "We locked ours when we left. Mrs. Silver did, too. But the Howard guy, he's not the most responsible fellow around, you know?"

Kesey nodded. "And how about the door to the basement stairway? Was that usually locked?"

Werner shook his head. "Years ago, we locked it. But it was too much of a hassle. It meant the tenants had to have two keys and keys get lost. Besides, there are meter readers and servicemen—for the washing machine and dryer—coming and going all the time. The keys were a pain. Nothing to steal down there anyhow. The tenants lock their stuff up in the storage bins."

So anyone from the outside could have walked in the front

door and gone down the basement, Kesey realized. "Who's usually at home during the day?"

Werner shrugged again. "The Silver boy might be. Or Howard's girlfriend. Everyone else would be at work."

Kesey stared out the window. Peter Silver had been attending summer school. That left only a young woman on the third floor. Not likely she'd know it if a stranger walked into Number 17 and went down to the basement.

But who from the outside wanted to blow up the building? Everything came back to the motive. Kesey turned to Werner. "You and your wife didn't get along, did you?"

The man rubbed his forehead. "We had our differences," he said slowly. "Everybody knows that. Trouble was, Olive wanted the moon. She couldn't understand why I didn't make big money—why I wasn't *somebody*." He looked sadly at Kesey. "I'm just an average Joe, you know? Sometimes I got tired of her putting me down."

Kesey's eyes narrowed. "How tired, Mr. Werner?"

The man started and looked at him in disbelief. "You can't think I *wanted*—you can't think that!" Tears actually came to his eyes.

"Can't I? After all, you're rid

of a wife you didn't get along with and you stand to collect a lot of insurance."

"You—you're crazy!" Werner sputtered. "Ever hear of divorce? If I wanted to get rid of my wife—" His voice broke.

Kesey suddenly felt cruel. But he had to push the point. "If you divorced her, there'd be a settlement. This way, you get all the money."

"Money!" Werner almost laughed. "I don't get any money! I don't get anything!"

"What?"

"My father-in-law never liked me. When we were married, he gave the house to Olive, in trust. She could live in it and have the income from the two apartments for her lifetime. But now that she's—dead, the insurance goes to my father-in-law's estate. I don't even have a place to live. I'm staying at the Y."

Kesey was speechless.

After lunch, Kesey interviewed Cranston Howard. He found himself disliking the man. Howard showed little emotion over Brenda Vine's condition. "Yeah, it's too bad about that," he said offhandedly. "She's a good kid."

"You two got along pretty well, then?"

"Ah, no." Howard looked away. "Brenda's got this thing

about marriage. Always pushing. That's why she had the baby, you know. Thought she could force me to marry her. But I fooled her. I said she could move in with me, but no marriage. That surprised her!"

"And what were you planning to do about the situation?"

Kesey asked.

"Do?"

"Were you going to go on living with her, or were you thinking about breaking up housekeeping?"

The young man looked uncomfortable. "As a matter of fact, I was going to leave her. It was getting to be too much. Nag, nag, nag. I didn't need that. And whenever I didn't do what she wanted, she'd act crazy."

Kesey looked interested. "How do you mean?"

"Threatening to kill herself. That sort of thing."

"Think she was serious?"

Howard's gaze was concentrated on the floor of Kesey's office. "Nah. It was just another way of pushing me. You know what women are like."

"Mr. Howard," Kesey said carefully, "do you think Brenda knew how to make a bomb?"

The young man looked up in surprise and grinned. "Inspector, anybody can make a bomb. You just get a book from the library. It'll show you how, step

by step. But I'll tell you this: Brenda didn't make that bomb."

"Why are you so sure? A suicide threat is often a plea for help. If help doesn't come, they sometimes follow through. Maybe Brenda was going to kill herself and take you with her."

Howard looked thoughtful. Then he shook his head. "I don't see it," he said slowly. "She might want to kill me. Heaven knows she was mad enough at me lately. And maybe she'd kill herself. But I know one thing. If Brenda put that bomb in the basement, she'd have had the kid out of the building somehow. She'd never let anything happen to that kid."

Kesey considered that, remembering that the girl's first action had been to drop the child to safety. Howard might be right. He tried another line of thought. "Mr. and Mrs. Werner—do you know what they fought about?"

Howard grinned. "The whole neighborhood did. She was a real battle-axe. I gather her old man had a bit of money and didn't like Ed. Apparently he told her Ed would never amount to anything, and it was killing her because she finally realized her old man was right. Not that there's anything so bad about Ed. He's just one of those guys who gets by—and nothing more."

When Howard left, Kesey reflected that, of all the fire victims, only Howard had lost nothing he valued.

That afternoon, Kesey paid a visit to St. Dymphna's psychiatric hospital.

"Father Thomas is being treated with certain drugs, inspector," the doctor explained. "You may find him a bit incoherent at times. An unfortunate side effect. And you'll have to put up with a nurse in the room. To make sure he doesn't get overly excited."

Kesey found Father Thomas thumbing through a magazine. He was sitting in an armchair, wearing pajamas and a robe. He seemed confused when the nurse explained who Kesey was and why he had come.

"I'll be glad to help if I can, inspector. I just don't see how—" His voice trailed off.

Kesey began gently. "I want you to tell me exactly what happened last Monday night. Did you hear the explosion?"

"Oh yes. I was just getting ready to leave the Mehan house next door. The blast shook the whole building. I stepped out onto the porch and saw the flames from Number 17. It reminded me—"

"Yes." Kesey didn't want the priest going back in time. "What did you do next?"

"I—well, it occurred to me that I should help. I ran over to the burning house."

"Tell me exactly what you saw," Kesey prompted.

Father Thomas closed his eyes. "Part of the building was in flames. There was a lot of smoke. A young woman and a child were on the grass. The woman was hurt." He paused, opened his eyes and frowned.

"Take your time, Father. What happened next?"

An expression of pain crossed the priest's face. "The man was there. He said, 'Jump!'"

"And then what happened?"

Father Thomas shook his head. "I couldn't! It was too high! My mother was lying on the floor. Something was wrong with her! My sister was screaming—the fire was getting closer. . . ."

Sweat poured down his face. His words came out in little gasps and jerks. "The man shouted 'Jump!' again, but I couldn't!" He looked at Kesey and finished very softly, "Then my father picked me up and threw me out the window." He began to sob.

The nurse came over and put her hand on Kesey's arm. "I think he's had enough," she said quietly.

Kesey nodded. It didn't matter. He hadn't been able to keep Father Thomas in the present

long enough. The priest had gone back to 1941, and that was no help with the case of Number 17 Porter Street.

What had set him off? Kesey wondered as he headed back to his office. Mentally, he went over the priest's story. Somewhere in it was the key that unlocked the metal door. Something had thrown Father Thomas back into the past.

On impulse, Kesey detoured to the public library and asked to see their microfilms of the 1941 newspapers. Maybe he would see something McCarthy hadn't.

And he did. It was right there, staring at him from the microfilm account of the old fire. A young man's face above the words, "Local hero." The face had changed with the years, but the eyes were the same.

Back in his office, Kesey tapped McCarthy on the shoulder. "Get in touch with the naval authorities. I want Charlie Planter's fingerprints."

"Charlie Planter?"

"He's our man. Changed his name after he'd deserted, of course. But you know something funny about deserters? Deep inside, they all want to come home. And Charlie eventually did. There really wasn't much danger. When you think about it, a big metropolitan-area like Boston has lots of lit-

tle neighborhoods that are self-sufficient. You could grow up in South Boston, for instance, then move up north to Chelsea, and with a little care you might never run into anyone who knew you before. Even if you did, after all those years, chances are no one would recognize you. Not unless they were looking for the resemblance, as I was this afternoon. *Or unless they happened to see you in exactly the same circumstances they'd seen you in forty-four years ago!*"

McCarthy looked as though the light had dawned. "Is that what set Father Thomas off?"

Kesey nodded. "He saw Charlie Planter standing beside a burning house, shouting, 'Jump!'"

"Are you saying that Planter set the bomb? But *why?*"

"Ah! The motive! That's what had me stumped until today. I kept looking at everyone in the case and asking myself who had something to gain. But nobody had anything to gain. But when I saw that picture of Charlie Planter, I looked at things from his point of view.

"Think about it. He was a loser. Everything he did went sour. Except once. One night, forty-four years ago, he did something right. And for a short while, life was sweet. Commendations and medals and recognition. Then he went back to

being plain old Charlie, and everything went sour again. How often do you think he wished he could relive that time? Be somebody important again?"

"That's why he did it?"

"I'll bet next year's salary on it. He never thought anyone would get hurt. The first time, everyone except Mrs. Thomas ended up unhurt—physically anyhow—and Mrs. Thomas died only because she had a heart condition. But no one at Number 17 had a bad heart, so he figured everything was going to be okay. He'd be there to save them, just like before.

"Trouble is, a fellow like Planter doesn't anticipate. He never considered the possibility that Mrs. Werner might take so much sedative she couldn't be awakened. Or that anyone would be in the cellar at that hour."

McCarthy reached for the phone.

"Shall I have Planter—

Olson—picked up?"

Kesey looked at him. "No, McCarthy! It's not hardworking, conscientious Olson—Olson who doesn't even take off sick. I'm talking about Werner."

"Werner? But he didn't rescue anybody!"

"That was another thing he didn't anticipate—that before he could get his wife out and start saving the tenants, someone else would come along and save them."

"And he really didn't want his wife to die?"

"Oh, no. She was the one he wanted to be a hero for. He was going to put an end to that nagging once and for all. He'd be *somebody* again."

"That's *all*? All that suffering . . . just because he wanted to be *somebody*?" McCarthy was silent for a moment. Then he said slowly, "Sometimes it's a hell of a world, sir."

"Yes, McCarthy. Sometimes it is."

SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

The five candidates were placed in the following order: (1) Pat; (2) Mollie; (3) Joan; (4) Edwina; (5) Gay.

FICTION

Yard Sale

by David Braly



Illustration by Arthur George

“Does this work?”

Horace turned and looked at the man who had asked the question. The man was about forty, unshaven, dressed in faded bluejeans and a T-shirt. A cigarette dangled from his mouth.

Horace smiled and walked over to him. The man looked down at the television set he'd asked about. It was a large portable RCA set with a nineteen inch screen.

“Yes, it works,” said Horace. “Great picture.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh. We've never had any trouble with it, except once when a fuse blew in it. That only put it in the shop for one day. We bought that set several years ago from J and T Electronics for one-fifty I think. It crackles some, especially late at night, but works fine.”

“Crackles?”

“Electronically, like the tubes were sputtering or something. But it's always done that. I asked the repairman about it when the fuse blew, and he said some sets just crackle like that.”

The man in the T-shirt nodded, still looking at the set. “One-fifty, huh?”

“Yes. It was used, but J and T had rebuilt it. Great picture. Never any trouble with it other than that one time.”

“Why are you getting rid of it, then?”

“We got a new set. Color, with a larger screen.”

The man in the T-shirt walked around the set, looking closely at every part of it. He removed the cigarette from his mouth and held it between the fingers of his right hand while he rested both thumbs in his pants pockets.

“What're you asking?” he said at last.

“Eighty.”

“I'll give you fifty.”

“Sold,” said Horace.

They walked over to the table, waited for Horace's wife June to finish with a customer, and then Horace wrote out a receipt while the man in the T-shirt counted out five tens.

After the transaction, Horace surveyed the scene around him. About seventy people were crowded into his front yard. Cars and pickup trucks lined both sides of the street for two blocks. His classified ad in the newspaper for the yard sale had paid off. That or the cardboard notices they'd tacked onto every telephone pole in the neighborhood.

Horace looked at the sky. Overcast, but no rain yet. When he'd first looked outside this morning and seen the grey blanket that stretched from horizon to horizon, Horace had feared that the sale would have to be cancelled. If it had been, they would've been out the cost of the newspaper ad and the time they had spent yesterday afternoon and evening getting things ready. But not a drop yet.

"Excuse me," said a woman's voice.

Horace turned and saw a dumpy, middle-aged woman in a faded red dress motioning toward him. He walked over to her.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Yes. This clock . . ." She was looking at the huge mantel clock that had once belonged to his Aunt Ruth. He wanted to keep it, but June insisted that it go. She'd been trying to force him to get rid of that clock for a dozen years, and had finally worn him down.

"What about it?"

"Well, it's beautiful. Mahogany, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Swiss?"

"German."

"My, my. . . . Does it work?"

"No. It stopped working years ago. A clock repairman might be able to fix it, although I can't swear to that. I never took it in to have it examined."

"Why not?"

"We don't have a mantel or anyplace else for a clock like that," said Horace. "I wish we did."

"How much?"

"Since it doesn't work and I'm not absolutely sure it can be made to work although I think it can, only ten dollars."

The woman stared at the clock for a minute, then gave one vigorous nod. "I'll take it," she said.

"Good." Horace saw a man looking toward him, obviously wanting him to come over, and looked to see if June or his daughter were at the table. June was. "If you'll take the clock to the table, my wife will take care of you."

"Thank you."

Horace walked over to the man who had been looking at him. He was a tall, well-dressed, lanky fellow in a grey suit. He was holding Horace's old office stapler.

"Does this work?" he asked when Horace reached him.

"Yes, although occasionally it'll jam up."

"How much?"

"A dollar."

A young woman in shorts strolled over carrying the bust of George Washington that Horace had bought a year ago during a warehouse auction. That moment of weakness had led to several days of complaining and belittling from June, and frequent barbed comments ever since from her and other family members. He had no hope that selling the bust would end their jokes, but at least the physical evidence would be gone.

"How much for this?" asked the woman.

Horace thought of the forty-two dollars he'd paid for it. "Forty dollars," he said.

"How much?"

"Just joking. Five dollars."

"Well, that's a bit steep."

"All right, for you, three."

"I'll give you two."

Horace sighed. "Done," he said.

Horace guided her to the table, where they completed the transaction. He wanted to handle it personally so that June wouldn't know that he'd lost forty dollars on the venture. After the woman left, he altered the carbon copy of the receipt, turning the two dollars into twenty-five. He hoped he would get away with it. He had to press the five directly onto the carbon paper, and it looked darker than the two dollars on the receipt. He would also have to add twenty-three dollars to the till.

After he finished, he was signaled by a thin young man in denim. The man was unshaven and had a greasy appearance. He was holding Horace's old Remington rifle.

"Does this work?" the man asked.

"Sure does. I went hunting just three years ago and got an eight-point buck with it."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding," said Horace. "One of the best rifles I've ever owned."

"Why're you selling it then?"

"I have another rifle that's even better. I don't do much hunting or target shooting any more. One gun's about all I can handle now. No sense in letting a fine gun like this one go to waste."

"How powerful is it?"

"Plenty powerful," said Horace. "It'll bring down a full-grown

stag at a hundred yards with one shot."

The man balanced the rifle in his hands, then put the butt to his shoulder and aimed at the grey sky. He squinted his left eye, looking through the telescopic sights, then drew back his right index finger without actually touching the trigger. He brought the gun down again, caressing its stock with his right palm while he balanced the rifle in his left hand.

"What would this do to a person?" asked the man.

"Hurt."

"Say you shot someone in the head with it."

"It would blow his head apart like an exploding melon," said Horace.

"Really?"

"Yes." Horace smiled. "I never tried it, of course, but I know that's what would happen."

"I see. . . . Are these sights accurate?"

"Sure are."

"If a fellow were to lie up on a hill and look through these sights at the highway, could he hit people through the car windows? I mean, what with the distance—about eighty yards—and them moving along at fifty-five?"

"Sure. All he'd have to do is get those crosshairs in the sights right on their heads, a little toward the front, and squeeze the trigger."

"And the car windows' plastic glass wouldn't deflect the bullets?"

"Not from a gun like that," said Horace.

"How much?"

"Two hundred."

"I'll take it."

Horace and the young man walked over to the table and completed the transaction.

Afterward, Horace looked up again. The overcast was still threatening, but no rain yet.

He saw a woman examining the old redwood chest that had been in the garage for ten years. He hurried over to her.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Key in Michael

by Elsa Barker

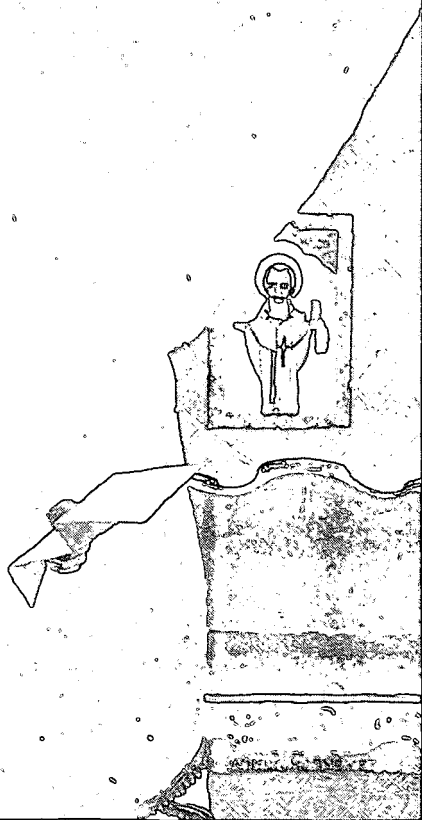


Illustration by Daniel R. Horne

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If I had not happened to say to Dexter Drake one evening that I had often been surprised by the strain of childlike gaiety in the tragic Russian temperament, I suppose I should never have heard the remarkable story of Prince Boris Vorontsov and the Key in Michael:

My friend the detective had just finished the strenuous case of the Jade Earring, and was idling after dinner, his slim athletic length stretched out on our sitting room couch.

"Yes, Howard!" Drake looked round at me with his keen black eye. "And it was that childlike strain in the tragic Russian soul which brought me one of the oddest problems I was ever called upon to solve. Indeed, I have rarely been more puzzled than I was for those few days in Paris, Nice, and Monté Carlo. I'll tell you about it."

Drake swung his feet off the couch and sat up. His lethargy was gone now; his bronzed aquiline face had come suddenly alive.

"Just a moment, Howard." He rose to his feet. "I'll need that curious paper I found in the Paris studio, and the diagram I worked out from it; they're in my filing cabinet."

He turned and strode down the corridor to his study.

It was seldom that I caught the great criminal expert in a story-telling mood, seldom that he had time for storytelling. But with his immense experience in so many parts of the earth, he could have gone right on and on, I suppose, like *Scheherazade*, for a thousand and one nights.

In three minutes he was back in the sitting room, with a large yellow envelope in his hand. Suppose I leave out the quotation and double quotation marks, and just let you imagine Dexter Drake sitting there on the couch and telling the story to me. . . .

It was late March [Drake said] in the second year after the Bolshevik horror began. Coming up from Constantinople, where I had been sent by the New York police to find a man who was dead when I got there, I decided to give myself a late holiday week in Paris, see my old friends of the Paris police, and make a few social calls.

For two years I had had no letter from my friend, the eighty-year-old Russian Princess Vorontsov, though I had learned in Constantinople that she had escaped from her devastated country and was back in her Paris house, in the Boulevard Suchet. Escaped from Russia—at eighty! But that did not really surprise me. She had always been an amazing person.

Her only son, Prince Michael Vorontsov, had also, I learned, got through the net of the Red Terror and had made his way into France; but he had died three months ago, in Nice. That was all I could learn about them in Constantinople. Where was Prince Boris, the old lady's grandson? They could not tell me. Was he alive? They did not know.

Now, I had known Boris Vorontsov since he was fifteen years old, though I had not seen him since the spring of 1914, when he was twenty. A delightful, impulsive, romantic young Russian he had been. What was he now—if he had survived?

But the first friend I saw in Paris assured me that Boris was with his grandmother. He had been in the old Russian army of the czar, and he also had made his way out—but alone, and after great hardships. Was he changed? No, not on the surface—the same gay, irresponsible, childlike young soul we had always known.

"But has the old princess any money now?" I asked.

"Nobody seems to know," my friend said. "She keeps only three servants instead of seven, and she no longer wears jewels—not a stone. She won't even talk about her escape—it's all very mysterious."

The servants, I thought, might be Russians, glad even of a roof.

"The princess," my friend ran on, "says that the world has come to an end, but that *she* has to sit tidily on the ruins for eighteen years longer, and cultivate her neglected talents."

It sounded just like her.

Many times the old princess had assured me that she was going to live to be ninety-eight. When she was a girl, and lady-in-waiting to some Russian empress whose name I have forgotten, a gypsy woman had told her that her span of life was a hundred years minus two years. Nothing could shake her belief in it. It was one of her many delightful oddities. "I shall see you a middle-aged man with gray hair, Dexter Drake," she said to me once, years ago, when I was twenty-one and she seventy.

While the octogenarian princess was "cultivating her neglected talents," I wondered when secret emissaries of the Reds would begin to peddle the Vorontsov jewels round the capitals of western Europe. Rumor had valued them long ago at the equivalent of a million dollars.

And Prince Michael was dead! But him I had never known well, for he was generally in Russia. I remembered a portrait of him in brilliant uniform which hung over the chimneypiece in the great

semi-detached room the Vorontsovs called the studio—for the princess dabbled with paints. She also wrote verses. The house in the Boulevard Suchet had once belonged to a sculptor who had sacrificed part of his garden to build the big studio. The garage was behind it, with its back against the house. If you will remember these details, they will help you to visualize my struggles with the Vorontsov puzzle. But the excitement did not begin until after Boris went down to Nice.

In the late afternoon of that first day of my holiday week in Paris, I was ringing the bell in the gate of their high-walled garden. I saw the house door slowly open and a middle-aged manservant—a Frenchman—came to unlock the gate.

No, the princess was not at home; she had been in Nice for the last month. But Prince Boris was there; he was alone in the studio.

"Then don't announce me," I said, and I turned down the little gravel walk to the right, and knocked on the well-remembered oaken door.

The door opened—there was a breathless moment . . .

"Why, Dexter! Dexter Drake! I don't believe it—I don't believe it—I don't—"

Grasping my hand, Boris drew me into the studio.

He was wearing a brown velvet house coat; and there was a gold-tipped cigarette between his slim fingers.

My friend had been right. The terrible years had but slightly changed Boris Vorontsov. The slight graceful figure was half an inch taller, maybe, and he had acquired a little yellow mustache. But the old spontaneous gaiety was there still, the laughter on the lips and in the tawny eyes.

Ensnouncing me in the largest easy-chair, he gave me tea from the samovar, gave me sweets, cigarettes.

Where was I staying? But I must have my things sent right over. Of course I must stay with them. Grandmamma would be so delighted. He was just starting for Nice, that night, to fetch her home. I must remain here while he was gone—a couple of days only. François would make me comfortable—he and the Russian cook. Of course I remembered his own old room at the head of the stairs? That was for me. He now occupied the Louis XIV room—the one which had been his father's. (Prince Michael, you know.) I had no engagement that evening? No? Oh, that was perfect! Then we could dine here together, early; I could see him off at the Gare de Lyon, then fetch my things from the hotel.

The lapse of years seemed unreal. This had always been their family living room; the French-drawing room in the main building was used only on formal occasions.

A few minor changes I noticed. A fine tapestry portrait of Louis XIV, with the sun disk over his head, which used to hang in Prince Michael's bedroom upstairs, was now in the studio—hung flat on the door of a large closet at the back of the room. And in the deep alcove, which with the closet divided that end of the studio, a new and magnificent lionskin covered the couch, in place of the old Kis Kilim.

"Isn't he a fine beast?" Boris smiled, when I noticed the lion. "Grandmamma found him six weeks ago in a shop in the Rue Châteaudun."

I did not say, but I thought that he must have been rather expensive.

It is better not to talk to Russians now about Russia—unless they mention it first. After a time Boris mentioned it, told me how he got out. It was a hair-raising tale, and it added a man's respect to my old affection for him. A man's and an adventurer's respect. I have been in some dangerous corners myself.

"Grandmamma says I must work now," he told me, "develop my brains, earn money. I am going to study medicine. She says life has now done the worst it can do. So we must look forward—be gay of heart."

Yes. Sitting "tidily" on the ruins.

Boris was silent for a moment. Then suddenly he looked round at me with his frank boyish eyes.

"I really don't know what we're living on," he declared. "Oh, I know what you're thinking, Dexter! But she got out of Russia with *nothing*—disguised in a peasant's rags. I believe there is something else. She helps the others—those who also have lost everything. Oh, she is deep—deep! Her playfulness doesn't deceive me. She has always complained of my indiscretion, but before she went down to Nice—she joined an old friend there at three hours' notice—she said that on her return she had something for me to do—a difficult task. Though she smiled—you know her odd little twisted smile. I wonder—"

When it was time for Boris to go to the station, the French manservant, François, got us the taxicab. The big motorcar of other days was gone now. The garage behind the studio was empty.

As I left my friend in a *wagon-lit* of the Riviera express, he said,

with a little flush of apology:

"If you come home late, Dexter, after François has gone to bed, you'll be sure that the gate is locked, won't you? Grandmamma never used to be nervous, but she charged me specially about the gate."

I assured him that I would even verify François's care of it. But it was not like the princess to be fidgety.

After getting my bags from the hotel, I returned to the house. Until a late hour I sat smoking and reading in the studio, alone with the portrait of the dead Prince Michael. The fate of that whole group—stark tragedy. And the way they face life now, those who survive, is very fine.

The next day I spent most of my time with a group of old friends in the Latin Quarter. My favorite section of Paris has always been the romantic Left Bank.

It was midnight when I returned to the Vorontsov house. I found the studio lighted, and on the table a telegram for me. It was from Boris, at Nice:

GRANDMAMMA DIED AT SEVEN THIS EVENING OF APOPLEXY SHE
WILL BE BURIED HERE BESIDE MY FATHER I AM WRITING YOU THERE
IS SOMETHING VERY STRANGE.

I was profoundly shocked—shocked and grieved to the heart. Dead—that amazing old lady! "*Something very strange.*" Whatever did the boy mean?

If I had not known that there were many Russians in Nice, I would have taken the first train for the south. But I decided to telegraph first, then wait for his promised letter.

The next day the Paris newspapers reported the death of the princess, at Nice, reported the presence of her grandson in Nice, gave an account of the Vorontsov family's long and romantic history.

When Boris's letter came, I knew for certain that I had a mystery to unravel—though what it was all about, what the princess *wanted me to do for her*, I had not the remotest conjecture.

Here is the poor boy's perplexing letter:

MY DEAR DEXTER:

You *know* how I feel—I cannot write about that.

Grandmamma was so happy when I told her you were in the

house. "Perhaps he will help you," she cried; "it's a task not unworthy of him." But she would not explain—not another word.

She was stricken at teatime. Only two hours she lived —unconscious after the first few moments. There was something she tried to say to me—she could not control her speech very well, but this much was clear:

"Tell Dexter—Dexter Drake—the key—in Michael—Left Bank—27 B."

Then she sank into coma.

What does it mean, Dexter? Was she trying to say 27 bis—the number of some Paris house on the Left Bank? But she spoke in English—you know how she always obliged me to keep up my English—and 27 B is what it would be in that language, isn't it? But what *street* on the Left Bank? What street? And what does she want you to do there?

She had a little bad spell, early in February. Our doctor in Paris told me—oh, *she* never mentioned it!—that a bullet grazed her side when she was hiding in the Russian forest.

How like her it was to think of you, Dexter, when she had to leave something half told! In the old happy days when you worked with the Paris police, she was always so thrilled by your cases. I remember the Rigaud casé, and your showing her how you worked out the conspirators' secret writing. How delighted she was! She loved puzzles.

I don't know just where I stand. Even the house is not ours; it has been held on a twenty years' lease. With all her playfulness, it was not easy to cross-question my grandmother.

Will you come down to Nice? The funeral will be Friday morning.

Your bewildered,
BORIS.

"The key—in Michael." I glanced up at that portrait over the chimneypiece. Yes, what else could she mean? I would take the picture down, after the servants had gone to bed. A key—to what? Yet, why "Left Bank" and "27 B," with no street name? But perhaps the mind of the dying woman was already wandering. Or there might really be some mystery about her way of living.

The future looked dark for my young friend. Without years of professional training, what career would be open to him in France? In America? We had not jobs enough, then, for our own ex-soldiers.

You know I had just come up from Constantinople, where penniless Russian nobles were starving in droves—literally, I mean.

It was after midnight when I locked the door between the studio and the main building, drew the heavy curtains close over the windows, and set to work. From a chair I climbed onto the broad mantelpiece, got the portrait of Prince Michael off its hook, and then to the floor, where I laid it face down on a rug. Inch by inch I went around the picture back, between the canvas and the stretcher. I was feeling for a thin key—feeling with the tip of my pocket nail file and listening for the click of metal against metal.

I had gone halfway round when the file met an obstruction—something soft, though, not hard.

Carefully, with the file and my thumbnail, I got it out—a tightly folded piece of thin gray paper. Was *that* what she had meant?

It had been at the bottom, near the right-hand corner. She could have got it in there without taking the picture down!

My heart must have been going ninety-five to the minute, as I unfolded the sheet of gray paper. Here is what I read:

LEFT BANK, 27 B.

5-35-26-5-18-36-20-18-31-5-9-31-23-24-14-18-3-31-27-28-24-9-11-
28-12-11-27-20-26-3-18-29-35-24-9-8-26-28-5-23-35-26-5-5-35-12-
31-8-31-9-29-20-9-24-26-5-9-26-5-35-9-11-28-23-28-23-12

In 1739.

There is something about a cipher which sets the imagination spinning—anybody's imagination.

Though I went back to the picture on the rug and continued my search, I found nothing more. The cipher was the "key."

So I rehung the portrait of Prince Michael.

Now, I have made it my business to know a good deal about ciphers, and there were peculiarities about this one which told me at a glance that it would be difficult to read.

But my first question was this: Had the dying princess mentioned my name just because I had always been associated in her mind with mysteries and enigmas of all sorts? This message in my hand might be written in a family code, which her grandson knew how to read. It seemed more delicate, more discreet, to show it to him before trying to read it myself. Many old families have hereditary secrets, which even the youngest of them would prefer not to share with any outsider. I might stumble on almost *any* romance—yes, any state secret—by fumbling with this "key" in Prince Michael Vorontsov.

There floated before my mind's eye a vivid picture of the princess, at the moment of our last parting several years before, at the garden door of this very room: A vigorous little old lady, not more than five feet two inches tall, in a richly embroidered black velvet robe with creamy lace round the neck. Very black eyes—eyes incredibly young—smiling out of that splendid old face with its network of tiny wrinkles.

In parting she had kissed me on both cheeks and told me to be wise—“*sois sage!*” as the French mother says to her child.

It is always some *little* memory which tugs at our heart when a friend is newly dead.

Before going to bed that night I hid the mysterious sheet of gray paper in a belt which I wear next my skin when traveling. And I locked the door of my bedroom. There was more than a chance that I might be the guardian of something extremely important, which I had better not meddle with until I had consulted with Boris.

But you know there is nothing which fascinates me like a mystery. Though I might try to keep my mind off the puzzle, the mind spins its own web on the borders of sleep. That short line at the end of the figures, “*In 1739,*” with the first words, “*Left Bank,*” drew around themselves all sorts of memories about the left bank of the Seine in the thirties of the eighteenth century. I thought of the Hôtel Biron, finished in 1730; but its street number is not 27B. Then in 1735 was built that little hunting lodge in the Ruelle des Gobelins. The year “1739” had a gruesome association, for that was the birth year of Charles Henri Sanson, the executioner under the Terror—though he belonged to another quarter of Paris. . . .

But my falling asleep did not end the events of that night. The window ledge of my room was not more than three feet from the flat roof of the garage. It was still dark when I was awakened by a slight sound outside my window.

I always know where my revolver is. In three seconds I was sending a shot—aiming low, for the legs—at a huge figure which had just risen to its feet at the far end of that roof. The man had climbed up from the garden wall—an athletic feat.

With a smothered cry he disappeared. I heard him drop on the other side of the wall; then after a moment I heard uneven running footsteps in the quiet street beyond. Hit, but not badly wounded!

Midnight marauders are no novelty in my life, but I wondered if there was some link between this one and the Vorontsov puzzle.

I rushed downstairs to the telephone, called up the police, the Sûreté, made myself known to them, and reported the case.

"There's a street lamp on the corner," I said, "and I saw the broad face of a man, his huge bulk, the dark cap he wore. He made off limping in the direction of the railway track. If you catch him tonight, telephone me" (I gave the number) "and I will come down and identify him. Otherwise it will have to wait two or three days, until I come back from Nice. Please give my regards to Inspector Lagrange and the chief."

I spent the rest of the night on the lionskin couch in the studio, to be near the telephone. The servants had awakened at the sound of the shot, but I reassured them and sent them back to bed.

The police did not report a capture that night, but the next morning François and I found bloodstains on the garden wall. I told the butler that some thief had probably read in the newspaper of the family's absence in the south, and was after the silver.

I was not sure of it myself. Until I knew what the cryptograph meant, I was keeping an open mind: The face I had seen in the light of the street lamp was decidedly Russian. . . .

My meeting with Boris in Nice was affecting. He had been deeply attached to his grandmother.

When I showed him the "key," his face went white.

"But I know nothing about it—nothing," he gasped.

We were sitting in my bedroom in the hotel.

"And the princess never taught you a cipher," I asked, "never talked about one? Neither she nor your father?"

"Never anything definite. But she was always interested in mysteries—after she met *you*. Five or six years ago, when you told us about the Rigaud case and the secret writing, you remember how keen she was. This paper is in her handwriting. Of course it may be a copy, but if so, who has the original? And how did it come to be hidden in my father's portrait?"

I got up and walked the floor, thinking. Boris was watching me, and there was a glint of excitement behind the grief in his eyes.

I stopped beside his chair, and looked down at him.

"Some secret of great importance may be hidden here," I said. "That is probably what she intended to tell you, on her return to Paris. Perhaps she had come to question the gypsy's prophecy that she would live to be ninety-eight."

The quick tears filled his eyes—spilled over.

"But I never could read it, Dexter—never in a thousand years."

"I'm sure that you couldn't. And I'm sure now that she meant

me to help you with this, when she said, 'Tell Dexter Drake.' If she had time, if she could have controlled her speech, she would doubtless have told you all the details of whatever secret is hidden here. I feel that she laid a charge upon me, with her dying breath."

The dear boy asked me to read the cipher—as if it had been a sheet of music! He had always believed I could do anything.

I sat down again, and took the paper from his hand. Then for the first time I examined it closely.

The highest number, 36, and the lowest, 3, proved that the letter signifiers do not go straight from 1 to 26, the number of letters in the English alphabet. There was a definite system of skipping, therefore. "*Left Bank—in 1739*" pointed clearly enough to the English language.

"As you see," I said, "there is no division between the words. That makes it immensely more difficult to read."

And if this was a secret writing which the princess had made herself, she was clever enough to avoid the obvious. She would never copy a ready-made cryptogram. I believed from the first that the very ingenious creation was hers.

There were sixty-seven numbers in all. I made a little table which showed that there were eighteen *different* numbers used.

Boris had been watching me in silence, nervously pulling at his little golden mustache. Suddenly he leaned forward:

"Dexter! Do you think—you know my father was very close to the czar. Though this paper is in Grandmamma's writing, I wonder—"

The same question had occurred to me. But I told myself that when I had read the paper, when I knew what the princess wanted me to do, I could judge for myself whether I would go on with it.

Let me tell you briefly—for the reading of ciphers is a fine art—how I confidently started on my labors. I made another table, which showed the number of times each symbol was used.

You know, of course, that the letter "e" and the word "the" appear oftener than any others, in English. As the figure "5" appeared oftenest, eight times, was it "e"? Of the seven three-number combinations ending in 5, two were alike—35-26-5. Ah! Had I found the word "the"? Once also, 5 was doubled as "e" is constantly doubled, in such words as "*free*," and "*street*." But when I glanced at the first five numbers, 5-35-26-5-18—oh, if 35-26-5 was "*the*," then the writing began with "*Ethe*—," which was only possible if the opening word was "*ether*" or some of its derivatives and if 18 was

"r." It took me some time to prove that 18 could not be "r," and also that 5 did not behave elsewhere like "e." Neither did 9, which appeared seven times, nor 26, which appeared six times.

"Well, *well!*" I exclaimed.

After an hour I had convinced myself that the word "*the*" did not appear in that writing *at all*, and that even the letter "e" must be well down on the list.

Then I knew—I knew that infinite care and labor had been expended upon this cipher, that the very words composing the message had been deliberately *chosen* by one who knew how to avoid the obvious frequencies of the letters.

I drew a long breath. I sat back in my chair.

"Is it going to be difficult, Dexter?"

"I'm afraid so. Your wonderful grandmother seems to have created a masterpiece of cryptography."

Boris gave me his affectionate smile.

"But you think she composed it herself?"

I nodded.

"But why, why?"

"How can I possibly tell, until I have read it?"

"But what can that be at the bottom," he asked. "*In 1739?*"

"Being the clearest thing, on the surface," I said, "it is probably not what it seems."

Then I told him about the man on the garage roof.

"But your description," he cried, "makes me think of Sergey Kovalchuk. He came from one of our Russian estates and he was our Paris gardener until 1914. Three months ago he came to see Grandmamma. He was quite ragged. She gave him food, gave him money, clothes, and she got him a job somewhere. With whom? Oh, I don't remember!"

I lost no time in telegraphing my old friend Inspector Lagrange to look for one Sergey Kovalchuk, and ascertain if his legs were uninjured. It is generally easy to find a foreigner in Paris.

The funeral of the Princess Vorontsov, in one of the Russian churches of Nice, was very impressive. What richness of temperament there is in those Slavs!

But in the late afternoon I left Boris with his Russian friends and went away by myself. I wanted to think, and all day I had not had a moment alone. I strolled up to the station, and took the first train for Monte Carlo. You know it is only ten miles from Nice to the gamblers' mecca, and that view of the Mediterranean always frees something in me.

The princess—an original soul she was—would have preferred that I mourn her that night in my own way.

I dined alone on the terrace and thought of her. In the days of her wealth she had told me gaily many a story of winning and losing at Monte Carlo. She had always insisted that some day a clever brain would "dig out the fault" in the roulette wheel and milk the casino cow as dry as a rock. Prince Michael, too, I remembered, had a weakness for watching the spin of the ivory ball. And he also had died down here.

After dinner I strolled into the casino.

Oh, I had not abandoned the problem of the cipher! Having failed to make head or tail of it, I was giving my mind that refreshment which acts on our thought as a bath acts on the body. I went into one of the gaming rooms—not to play, but to watch.

As I stood near one table, right before me were two middle-aged American women, a fat one and a thin one. The fat one, as I judged from their comments, was new to the Riviera. She wanted to play; but the thin one was trying to dissuade her with the warning that in the end the casino bank always wins and the players lose, because of the zero at the head of the wheel—the bank's rake-off.

As I listened, slightly amused, an idea came to me. Could the Princess Vorontsov have been winning at the gaming tables the money to keep herself going? The idea was not nearly so wild as it sounds. As everyone knows, many old ladies seem to make some sort of living at the tables, playing those little conservative systems of theirs.

Late that night, on my return to Nice, I went to Boris's room and asked him if his grandmother had been playing.

"Winning, you mean? But I really don't know."

He then showed me her Paris bankbook, which he had just found. Five months ago the princess had deposited fifteen thousand francs, three months ago twenty thousand francs. Those figures were something to think about.

But neither of us wanted to question the casino people, nor anyone else. It would have seemed disrespectful of the dead woman.

Again Boris talked of the little he knew about her escape, how she had lain in the forest at night, had been shot at, had been half drowned.

"My father, you know, was not with her," he said. "They found each other in France. All her courage and gaiety—oh, she was just trying to keep *me* in good spirits! But of course I can't study medicine now. How many years does it take? I shall have to give up

the lease of the dear house, sell the furniture—just to exist, until I get some kind of work to do.”

The next day we returned to Paris, and I telephoned Inspector Lagrange at the Sûreté. Yes, the police had got Sergey Kovalchuk. At first he was half hysterical, babbling about some letter from his mother in Russia. When asked why he tried to enter the house in the Boulevard Suchet, he had muttered, “Looking for something.” Then he became stubbornly silent.

“We had better see Sergey tomorrow,” I said to Boris, “and try to make him confess just *what* he was looking for.”

“Oh, Dexter! It might have something to do with our puzzle!”

I intended to shut myself up, in that quiet house behind the garden, and wrestle with the “key in Michael.” Whether it solved my friend’s problem, or got him into deeper trouble, we had to know what it meant. There is something hypnotic about a mystery.

After Boris went to bed that night, in the Louis XIV room which had been Prince Michael’s, I spent two full hours figuring out combinations of those numbers. Yes, the frequencies were all wrong. After “e” the natural succession runs roughly, *t, a, o, i, n, s, h, “r”* and “*u*” are well down on the list. But that knowledge was getting me nowhere.

Then I tried more recondite systems. I had already tried reading it backward, even tried French, German, Italian, with the same negative result. Suppose it were written in Russian, after all?

Of course, “27 B” might have nothing to do with a house on the Left Bank. Perhaps 27 was the letter “b.” But there are eight letters, vowels and consonants, which can follow “b” in our language, and probably five thousand words which begin with “b.”

Piqued and exasperated, I finally went to bed.

You know how, as we doze off to sleep, any casual words we have heard in the last twenty-four hours or so may go floating through the mind. I heard again that thin American woman in the gaming room telling the fat one, “In the long run the bank always wins.” In my half-sleeping mind, *bank* got mixed up with “*Left Bank*” and “27 B.” Then one half of my brain was reminding the other half that 26, not 27, was at the *left* of the bank’s zero on the roulette wheel.

My heart began pounding. I sat up in bed—broad awake.

“*Left Bank, 27 B, 26—*”

Now what *did* follow 26, at the left of the wheel? Surely not 27, for the numbers in the circle are all placed irregularly. I had not

played roulette for years.

"But it might be! It might be the *key*!" I cried aloud.

I leaped out of bed. In my bare feet I rushed down the hall and threw open the door of my friend's room, switched on the light.

"Boris! Boris, wake up! Have you got a roulette book?"

"W-wh-what?" he answered drowsily.

"Have you got a roulette book?" I repeated rather impatiently.

"A—a what?"

I plumped down on the side of the bed.

"Any book on roulette. You *must* have something of the kind in the house. Everybody who knows the Riviera—Wake up!"

"B-but I am awake. There must be one"—a deep sigh—"somewhere in the house. I'll look—in the morning."

"No, no! I must have it now. It's about the cipher."

That woke him all right.

"I'm not sure," I explained, as he threw on his dressing gown and slippers. "I just had a sudden idea—I half dreamed it. But that's what acumen is, nine times out of ten—a quick grab at some floating subconscious perception."

"We'll try the bookshelves in the studio first," Boris said.

I stopped in my room to snatch a few garments, then followed him downstairs.

In the studio we switched on all the lights and set to work, hunting along the shelves.

One of the first books I saw bore the title *Cryptography*. So the princess *had* studied the subject!

It was Boris who found the roulette book.

"Look!" he cried. "It has the design of the wheel as a frontispiece!"

I grabbed it—examined it hurriedly.

To the left of the zero, "the Bank," the numbers ran 26, 3, 35, and so forth. The 27 was way around to the right, on the lower arc.

"But wait!" I cried. And I counted rapidly backward from 27. . . . "Why, Boris! There's just the right number of letters, twenty-six, going round to the left from 27 to 26, which is next to the zero, 'the Bank.' So 26 could be *a*."

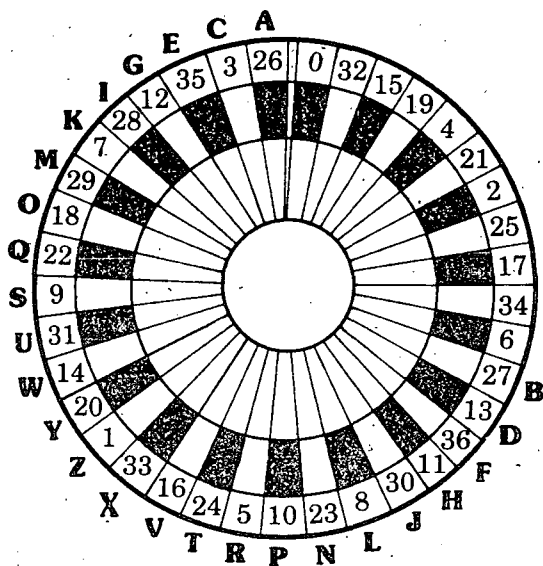
"Dexter! You don't mean it!" He clutched my arm excitedly.

"If it begins at the left of the Bank, the zero," I said, "and if 26 should be *a* and 27 be *b*, then—don't you see?—the order of letters must jump *back and forth* between them. Then 3, next to 26 *a*, would be *c*, and 13, next to 27 *b*, would be *d*, and so on."

I began to write down the letters beside the numbers on the

wheel diagram. Of course I might be chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, but suppose it should be the solution! Oh, it would have been clever—infernally clever of her to have thought out such a thing!

Here is the scale I made. The black and red of the roulette wheel do not show, but the colors played no part in the Key in Michael.



My money belt was still around my waist. In three seconds I had the gray sheet of paper in my hands, and was jotting down the numbers on another sheet, with the tentative letters beneath them. After the first four letters, I shouted:

"It works! Man alive, it works! I have got a word already—the word is *rear*."

Then I ran right on to the end without stopping.

Here is what I had!

5-35-26-5-18-36-20-18-31-5-9-31-23-24-14-18-
R e a r o f y o u r s u n t w o

3-31-27-28-24-9-11-28-12-11-27-20-26-3-18-29-
c u b i t s h i g h b y a c o m

35-24-9-8-26-28-5-23-35-26-5-5-35-12-31-8-31-9-
e t s l a i r n e a r r e g u l u s

29-20-9-24-26-5-9-26-5-35-9-11-28-23-28-23-12
m y s t a r s a r e s h i n i n g

In 1739

It was the work of a moment to separate the words:

*"Rear of your sun,
Two cubits high,
By a comet's lair,
Near Regulus,
My stars are shining."*

"How she piled up the *r*'s," I cried, "by using '*rear*,' '*near*' and '*lair*' and the *u*'s by '*cubits*' and '*Regulus*'! Look at the *s*'s, too! How she kept down the number of *e*'s, did not once use the word '*the*,' and threw out all the usual frequencies! A technical masterpiece!"

"But Dexter! What does it *mean*? Would she have appealed to you with her dying breath, just to decipher a poem in free verse?"

"Of course not. Can't you see—can't you read between the lines? What do you fancy she means when she says her stars are shining?"

"Stars?" His tawny eyes widened with wonder.

"Yes, what would she hide in a difficult code, and doubly hide again in these cryptic lines?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Something on the Left Bank—but how stupid of me! Of course '*Left Bank*' and the '*27 B*' were only the key to the *cipher itself*."

His face fell. He looked around for a cigarette, lighted one.

"It seems to me, Dexter, that we're just where we were before."

"Does it? Does it?" I strode up and down the studio.

Boris, who had dropped down in a chair, looked round at me suddenly, and there was a look of awe on his face:

"It's just as if she were speaking to us from another dimension of space—'*by a comet's lair, near Regulus, behind the sun!*'"

Then I took from the shelf that book I had found, *Cryptography*, and showed it to him.

"I know now—know for sure," I said, "that this cipher was written for *you*. Had she lived, on her return from the south she intended to give you the Key in Michael, give you this book on cryptography,

and then watch your struggles with them. The secret concealed in those figures will change your whole life. There is no other possible inference now. And how like her it was to make a great *game* of it! 'Perhaps Dexter will help you,' she said, when she knew I was in the house. Gay of heart, you know. Courage and gaiety. The echo of tragedy under the childlike laughter."

If you could have seen that boy's face!

"Now you ought to know what she meant by '*your sun*'—yours," I said. "Something concrete—some object, when she says '*rear of*.' Something known to yourself and your grandmother. Think, Boris, think!"

"Why—she gave me a sunset picture; it's hanging in my room."

We rushed upstairs again.

Yes, there was the sunset hung high, at least five feet from the floor, and it was only a small canvas.

"But she says '*two cubits high*,' Boris, and two English cubits are only three feet—not five or six. And look—only a blank wall behind it."

I sounded the wall—no sign of a secret hiding place.

Then I tried another tack. "What did your grandmother ever say about a *comet*? I want the comet's lair."

"Why—why, they used to call her motorcar the Comet. It went so fast, you know, and it had a vapory tail. But she gave it to the French government in the early days of the war."

"The garage!" I cried. "*The Comet's lair*! But she says '*by*' a comet's lair—not in it. The studio is '*by*' the lair." And I rushed downstairs again.

As I passed through the studio door, my eye lighted on something which brought me up with a start.

"I'm just going to *think* this out now," I said. "Will you lie down over there, on the couch in the alcove, and be very quiet?"

Boris stretched himself out on the lionskin from the Rue Châteaudun. I went and sat down in the far corner of the room.

"How kind you are, Dexter, to take all this trouble for me!"

"Kind? But I wouldn't have missed this for worlds! It's a case of the sort which your grandmother used to delight in. I have everything *now*, but one link in the chain."

We were both utterly still for a minute or two.

"*Your sun*!" I leaped to my feet. "I've got it."

He came running from the alcove—breathless with excitement.

I pointed to that Louis XIV tapestry which hung, as I have told

you, on the door of the closet, which with the alcove divided that end of the studio.

"When did she bring that tapestry down from your father's room—*your* room now?"

"Let me see—yes, the very same day she brought home the lion."

"Of course, of course! As every high school child has learned, Louis XIV was the *sun* king, the *Roi Soleil*; the sun disk was his emblem. It's all over the royal buildings of his time, and look at it—there at the top of the tapestry. *Your* Louis XIV room, *your* tapestry, *your sun*, therefore. 'Rear of your sun,' in that closet."

"But she says, '*near Regulus*.'"

"Of course it's near Regulus. Don't you know the star Regulus is in the sign Leo, the Lion? Your grandmother bought that lionskin for the alcove six weeks ago, you told me. So *that* was the time when she found the word *Regulus*, which had *u's* enough in it to help make that cipher obscure. Then she ran down to Nice—postponing the revelation until her return. I've not seen the inside of that closet, but closet and alcove are backed by the comet's lair, and behind your sun-king tapestry, two cubits high, three feet, we shall find—"

He leaped at the door, threw it open, switched on the electric light which hung on a cord from the ceiling. On the closet floor were some cardboard boxes containing paint tubes, a palette, paint rags; and on the back wall was hung an old linen curtain, soiled and discolored.

The closet was shallower than the alcove, by fully two feet.

I drew the curtain aside—revealing a wall of paneled wood. The top of the lower panel was about three feet from the floor.

"Two cubits high," I said. And I began running my fingers along the top of the panel, feeling, pressing here and there for a concealed spring. That is one of my little detective specialties, you know.

Suddenly, noiselessly, so delicate was the mechanism, the panel tipped over from the top on its oiled hinges.

The smoke-gray steel of a small safe caught the light from the overhead lamp.

"Oh—*oh!* I never knew it was there!" Boris cried. "But the combination! We haven't the combination!"

"Yes, we have. Look at the dial. It's a double-combination lock, with a double radiating disk. It requires both letters and numbers to get into this hiding place of your wonderful grandmother's. Suppose we try, '*In 1739?*' I kept that for the last. I thought it was not

what it seemed."

I dropped on one knee beside the safe. On the outer ring of the disk I picked out the letters "*i-n*," then on the inner ring I picked out "*1-7-3-9*," and gave a twirl.

But nothing happened—nothing. For a second I was nonplussed.

"Of course, of course!" I cried. "We have to reverse it, in the code, turn the letters into numbers, the numbers into letters. But wasn't it witty of her, to use '*in*' to get into a safe!"

It took only a moment. In the code, "*i-n*" became "2823" and "*1-7-3-9*" (as you will see by a glance at my diagram of the roulette wheel) became the letters "*z-k-c-s*," a "word" which no safe breaker ever would think of.

I picked at the double-disk again, and my heart was going fast. Another twirl—the safe door swung open.

"But Dexter! It's only—why, it's only a pile of old rags!"

A chill ran up my spine. I spoke under my breath:

"You take them out—you—they are sacred—those rags—"

He made a little purring noise in his throat.

Leaning forward, with trembling hands he drew out something and held it up—a nondescript woolen garment, half dress, half cloak.

"Wait a moment," I gasped; "there are other things here."

I drew forth a small, worn leather bag, with a strap to go around the neck. Behind it on the floor of the safe were a small revolver and a folded paper.

Then together we left the closet. Sitting down on the floor of the studio, facing each other, we reverently spread out the things between us.

"The revolver"—I touched it with awe—"that was, of course, for herself—if she should be taken by the Red soldiers."

The tears were running down Boris's face. My own eyes were wet.

I opened that worn leather bag, took out the contents: a little packet of tea, another of salt, a comb, a cheap knife, fork, and spoon. A small brandy flask—empty.

Then I unfolded that paper—gave it to Boris, without a word.

It was a Russian passport. You know Russians have to have "papers," to go from one village to another in safety.

But this was the passport of one "Anna Kovalchuk, seamstress." Kovalchuk! The name of that man on the garage roof.

Boris shook his head—he knew nothing about this.

I reached over and touched his hand. "Look—"

I was pointing to a round hole under one of the arms of that woolen garment—dull stains there were, too.

"A bullet hole," I whispered. "The bullet passed through and out—see the other side of that seam."

He tried to speak—choked. He had seen those dull stains.

I was feeling the *inside* of that rough woolen garment, and now I took Boris's hand, flexed the fingers, and pressed them against the coarse lining around the waist of it.

"Dexter!"

I thought he was going to faint.

"Steady," I breathed, "steady, dear boy. Bring the scissors—that's her little sewing basket there on the table."

It pulled him together, having something to do.

He got me the scissors, then just dropped down on the floor again, facing me.

In two seconds I held out my hand, palm upward—a *great gleaming emerald!*

The Vorontsov jewels! A million dollars' worth! Eighty years old, she had got out of Russia with them—torn from their settings, and sewn in the lining of that garment of the peasant seamstress.

For herself, she could never have done it. But for him—

After half an hour of cutting and ripping I had a large bowl full of priceless great stones—diamonds, rubies, pearls, emeralds, sapphires. And there were a few smaller stones, like those two which she must have sold for the fifteen and twenty thousand francs.

Why hadn't she told her grandson? Because she wanted him to *work*, not idle away his young life. But when she had the bad spell early in February, she must have realized that it was no longer safe to withhold the knowledge from him. He should work for it, though—labor and think and develop his brains. A great game she would make of it. Can't you imagine the shine of those brilliant old eyes of hers—eyes so incredibly young in that splendid old wrinkled face of hers—as she laughingly helped him with hints now and then to decipher the cryptograph? And when at last they had opened the safe—when he *saw* what she had done for him!

"*Sois sage!* Study and work, my child, for we Russians have learned how uncertain wealth is."

Sergey Kovalchuk confessed to Boris and me the next day. In that letter from his mother, Anna Kovalchuk, she wrote him about *selling* the passport and dress to the princess, who had paid her for

them with a diamond. When Sergey learned that the princess was dead, and that her grandson was absent from home, he had thought there might be other diamonds in the house.

That wildly grateful young Boris wanted to share the Vorontsov jewels with me! It took me the rest of my holiday week in Paris to persuade him that I had just had the time of my life in finding them for him, that they were his lawful inheritance, like any other estate, but that they ought to be sold now and the money wisely invested. Of course I accepted one stone—oh, it was a big one!—as a souvenir of the princess. It is still in a safe deposit vault in Paris. When I'm tired of this business of criminal hunting, I'll sell it and buy a nice house—somewhere on the *Left Bank*.

So Dexter Drake ended his story of the Key in Michael, sitting there on the couch in our living room in New York, many years afterwards.

"Of course, Howard," he added, after a moment of musing, "the jewels were in no danger, so long as nobody knew that she had escaped with them. The safe had probably been in that closet for years; she had only to have the combination changed. Who would look for a secret writing between the canvas and stretcher of a portrait over the mantelpiece? And even on the unimaginable chance that the paper was found and deciphered, who would fancy that a few lines of *vers libre* about sun, stars, and comets, had anything do to with the Vorontsov jewels?"

"Who," I replied, "except you, would have fancied it!"

"Ah!" The great detective gave me his quick bright-eyed smile. "But you are forgetting the strange message to me from the dying woman. And even I, you remember, did not find it so easy to read that ingenious, that *unique* cipher, worked out on the numbers of the roulette wheel!"

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

Photo by F. de Stebnicki, Strasbourg.



NICOLAS FREELING

Have you ever noticed the remarkable similarity among products of equal mediocrity—the blandness, the sameness shared by so much of what is labeled “creative” these days? Take your local sidewalk art fair, for example, with its oils of barns and picturesque rotting piers, its pastels of pretty people and perky pets, its watercolors of fresh flowers adorning sunny windowsills.

Not that I dislike them—quite the contrary. It is rather gratifying to discover the same kinds of art at any given street fair. Pictures like these are comforting and pleasing to the eye; and if they don’t arouse any strong

emotions, any deep passions, who could be surprised? It’s not likely that that was ever the artists’ intent. They present instead an appealing view of the world, and if the real world offers far too few examples of such beauty, it doesn’t matter. The artist has no *obligation* to present “reality,” and anyway, how many of us want “reality” on our bedroom walls?

But I’ll bet that while you can stroll idly through a sidewalk art fair, smiling all the while (and never stopping at all, perhaps), you can’t walk through a modern art museum the same way. You will sometimes stop—or be stopped, almost—and actually frown.

Some of the artwork simply won't "speak" to you at all. To some you might object. Many people, in fact, despise most of modern art. At the same time there are those who like nothing better than to haunt museums and galleries, who spend pots of money on expensive art books, who find modern art exciting. Either reaction may be explained in this way: the artist has managed to arouse *some* kind of response, even if it's only bewilderment or boredom, while his street fair counterpart consistently pleases and rarely alienates.

I use this as an introduction to Nicolas Freeling and his Van der Valk mysteries because it's probable that many of you are already devoted fans, while others have discovered—or will discover—that Freeling isn't their cup of tea at all. Don't let this assumption of mine discourage you. But it does seem to me that Freeling's work, like the modern art hung in the museum, is generally of a higher quality than most of what we accept as solid mystery writing.

Freeling was born in London in 1927, and worked for a number of years throughout Europe as a hotel and restaurant cook. His first novel (*Love in Amsterdam*) was published in 1962, and he rather quickly followed up this introduction to his Dutch police inspector with another

nine novels. The author then moved on in his own inimitable way, building a series around Van der Valk's wife Arlette, and another around a brand new character. Freeling has been honored with the highest awards given to mystery writers by England, France, and the U.S., so don't think—if you haven't ever read a Freeling novel—that I'm slipping you a hot tip. Freeling is one of the most respected authors in the business.

Van der Valk is a Dutch police commissaire, a man whose career and very life have on several occasions been threatened because of his decision to go his own way. We learn that his wife Arlette, a strong-minded Frenchwoman, has been a disadvantage politically, yet we are never in doubt about her importance to Van der Valk. (She appears in the background, to a lesser or greater extent, in every book; and in *Auprès de ma Blonde* she comes into the foreground as well.)

So here's a Dutch policeman, claiming to come from "peasant" stock, often voicing his belief that he's a "poor policeman," just as often comparing himself to fictional detectives, especially Maigret—and always coming up short. But we find him a man sensitive to character, a staunch feminist in the true sense of the word, a dogged

investigator who thinks of a crime as a case where characters need to be revealed. It goes beyond a mere search for motive: rather, Van der Valk looks for the patterns in people's behavior, patterns that will reveal the more mundane information as to whodunit. "Power, in his [Van der Valk's] book, sprang from the nape of the neck."

Characters, then, are focal in a Freeling tale. There's action galore in *King of the Rainy Country*, for instance; the entire book is a chase, really, across Europe. Yet it is the people—how they relate to one another, how they manipulate or exploit or incite one another—who hold the plot together. And like one of the

women in *King*, there are strong, wonderful women characters at the centers of *Tsing-Boom!* and *Question of Loyalty*, women whose complex natures and motives make a marked contrast to the rather simple tastes and aims of Van der Valk.

Look for reality without gratuitous sex or violence or seaminess. Be prepared to travel around Europe, and to get a strong taste of the countries used as settings. And one final suggestion: try to read the earlier books first, and save the later ones—especially *Auprès de ma Blonde*—for last. There's a good reason for this. You can find many of the novels reprinted by Penguin in paperback editions.

Enjoy.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Robert B. Parker fans will be thrilled to hear that there's a new Spenser novel. **The Catskill Eagle** (Delacorte Press, \$14.95, 311 pp.) is the twelfth in the series. The very strong, very sensitive Boston-based P.I. comes on even stronger (and more sensitive, too) in this book than in earlier Spenser novels. Perhaps it's because the enigmatic Hawk is his sidekick throughout (which certainly accounts for some, if not all, of the violence in the book) and because the adventure involves "rescuing" Spense's estranged lover, Susan Silverman (which definitely accounts for the increased sensitivity). Also making an appearance from previous tales is Rachel Wallace, who helps Spense and Hawk (and the CIA, if you can believe it) take out an arms-trading millionaire and a hefty percentage of his organization. This is more action-packed than most mysteries, and may be too strong for some tastes.

S.F.X. Dean's latest Neal Kelly tale is **Death and the Mad**

Heroine (Walker and Company, \$13.95, 209 pp.). Professor Neal Kelly returns from his sabbatical in England to Old Hampton College, where he's a tenured teacher. While the latest Spenser novel is heavier than earlier Parker novels, the newest Dean tale seems more light-hearted than its predecessors. For one thing, the tragedy (or murder) at the heart of the book is an old one, and involves Kelly only peripherally. For another, Dean has introduced two absolutely delightful characters, guaranteed to charm the stodgiest readers and the hardest hearts. They are the Welsh poet and Dylan Thomas scholar who is temporarily replacing Kelly, and the man's red-headed Irish wife. Add them to the comfortable Kelly and the appealing New England college-town atmosphere, and you have a mystery with ample entertainment value.

Herbert Resnicow got a lot of encouragement from reviewers on the publication of his first novel (*The Gold Solution*), the debut of a sleuthing couple named Norma and Alexander Gold. The newest Gold adventure won't disappoint, either. **The Gold Deadline** has it all: lots of colorful suspects; suspense as Alex races the clock in a million-dollar bet; an ingenious method of murder; and, as a background, the world of professional ballet. An impressario is killed in the theater box adjoining the Golds', and the victim's young assistant appears to be the only one who could have done it. Gold recreates the murder conditions and catches his murderer, while his fond but sassy wife Norma does the legwork and narrates the adventure in her own snappy style. We're promised a new book in this series, and it won't be a moment too soon for me. (Avon Books, \$2.95, 189 pp.)

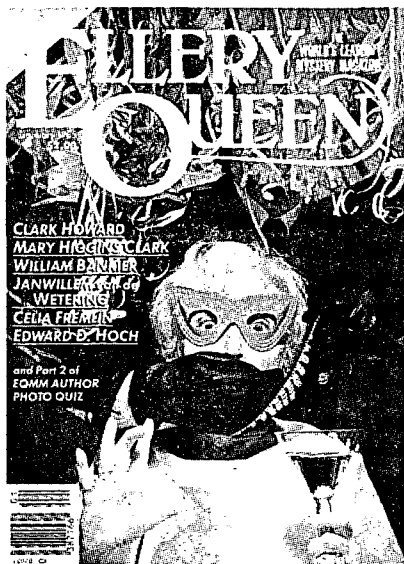
Lovely in Her Bones (Avon Books, \$2.95, 221 pp.) is another second novel, Sharyn McCrumb's sequel to *Sick of Shadows*. Heroine Elizabeth MacPherson again turns to amateur sleuthing, this time to find out who is haunting an old burial ground, the site of a university-sponsored archaeological dig. Elizabeth has signed up so that she can see her brother's college roommate, the grad student Milo, hard at work in the field, doing what he does best. Her job is to be an apprentice, measuring skulls as they are dug up; and she's just getting used to *that* when the professor in charge is found with a souvenir tomahawk stuck in his own skull. Elizabeth isn't quite as much at home on a dig as she was at her cousin's wedding (in *Sick of Shadows*), and her fellow diggers aren't as odd as her kinfolk were. But *Lovely* is lively reading anyway.

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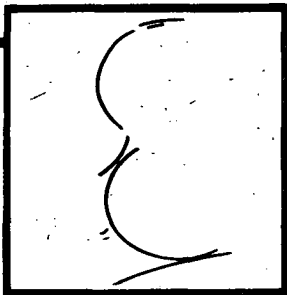
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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Jennifer Shaw



Compromising Positions, adapted by Susan Isaacs from her comic novel of mystery and suburban life, is the story of how an ex-reporter from *Newsday*, now a rather bored housewife, becomes intrigued with the murder of her periodontist, Dr. Bruce Fleckstein. Fleckstein was not only the biggest womanizer in town, but our heroine, Judith Singer (Susan Sarandon), was in his office, helpless—his hands in her very mouth—only the day before.

When Mr. Singer, a stodgy but successful lawyer (Edward Hermann), mentions in passing that Fleckstein was about to get the "book" thrown at him for his involvement in a Mafia-connected drug ring, Judith digs out her gumsoled shoes and returns to investigative reporting. She has nothing much better to do, as her children and

husband don't understand or need her, and throws herself wholeheartedly into the case, ignoring admonitions from both her husband and a brooding, Latin detective played by Raul Julia.

The detective ruthlessly probes the neighborhood, digging for clues, but comes up empty-handed every time. Meanwhile, Judith is overwhelmed with information. Her friends and acquaintances contribute pieces of it, for Judith has the kind of personality that makes one want to be her best friend.

Finally not even the detective can resist her, and completely enamored, he joins forces with her to solve the mystery. In the end, a twist provides much excitement and comic entertainment.

The mystery in this movie serves mainly as a vehicle to



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push the plot along. The focus is on the comic, and on how some highly intelligent women cope with being trapped housewives. All the women in the movie are in control of their lives except for Judith, who tries to gain that control by solving the mystery. Her work on the case allows her to escape her husband's influence, but everywhere she turns, she is confronted by Detective Suarez, another male authority figure. Their romance does not ring true, for until he falls in love with her, David Suarez doesn't seem any better for our heroine than her husband does. The movie contradicts itself: when all the men are portrayed as dolts, it becomes difficult to take one seriously. The story is saved, though, by the fact that Judith does not in the end run off with the detective, does not leave her family, and is strong enough to do what is morally correct for her and what she feels is best for everyone. The viewer is relieved—but for the wrong reasons: Suarez just never was good enough for her.

Susan Sarandon plays Judith Singer with the wit and intelligence that Susan Isaacs intended for the character. Judith is, in fact, even more likable on screen than in Isaacs' novel. Indeed, all the characters in this film are so impeccably cast, so

well acted, that they outdo their counterparts in the book. In her opening description of Dr. Bruce Fleckstein, for example, Isaacs says he is "handsome." The details of his life as Suffolk County's biggest pornographer and adulterer come later. But in the movie version, Joe Mantegna, his hair perfectly in place and his hand locked in our heroine's mouth, establishes the character immediately. None of the "dirt" that comes out about Dr. Fleckstein surprises us: we have understood him from the beginning. Such insight, on the other hand, leaves little to be disclosed in terms of the mystery. We don't wonder as much who killed Fleckstein because he is so awful; it seems natural for someone to want to murder him. In the novel, the motive is more gradually revealed.

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Raul Julia and Susan Sarandon in *Compromising Positions*.

THE STORY THAT WON



Arthur Tress

The August Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by David E. Ward of East Lansing, Michigan. Honorable mentions go to Mary Courtney of Garland, Texas; Willie Rose of Antioch, California; Wanda Blank Freynick of Alexandria, Virginia; J. Christine Madeker of Decatur, Illinois; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Ron Lietzke of Bellevue, Michigan; Douglas Lamoreux of Dakota, Illinois; Warren Wightman of Fairport, New York; Johanna Boggero of Fresno, California; H. P. Stabbitz of Markham, Ontario, Canada; and Jim Reeves of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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"That's right, lieutenant. He claims he went there just to paint the place, only no one was home at the time. He says he was just walking away minding his own business when I stopped him."

"Well, question him again. I don't like his story. Nobody paints his castle around here any more, at least not since that fast-talking aluminum siding salesman came through here last year. Keep pounding away at his explanation for being there. Poke holes in his story, put pressure on him. Whatever you do, don't accept that first story of his."

"Gee, lieutenant, I don't know. He's sticking to his story, and he was clean when we picked him up."

"Look, Smith, all we need is for him to change his story."

"Lieutenant, I don't see what's so important about making him change his story. He's stuck to this first one so far. How would we nail him if he gives us another story?"

"Because, Smith, then we'll know for sure that he's a second story man."

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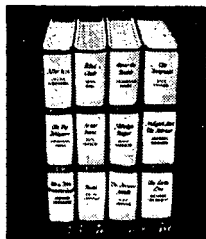
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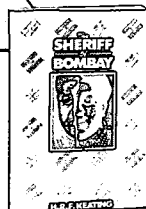
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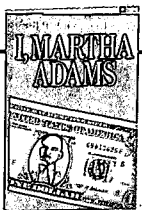
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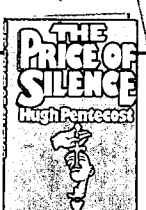
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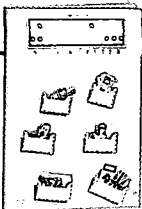
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